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Goblin Slayer

KUMO KAGYU

ILLUSTRATION BY
NOBORU KANNATUKI



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GOBLIN SLAYER







GOBLINS.

They were in the courtyard of an old castle. Once upon a time, a spring had delivered water to the area, and banquets had perhaps been held in this marble plaza. But now, the spring was dried up; the place was covered in snow, all signs of grass and trees vanished from the garden, any sight of knights or nobles long since past. Now it was the province of goblins, and as such, it had become a waste heap caked with blood and filth.

The goblin priest nodded and, with a gesture that was a comical imitation of Lizard Priest's own, motioned the party inside.

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GOBLIN
SLAYER

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GOBLIN SLAYER

◆ VOLUME 5 ◆

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Illustration by
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GOBLIN SLAYER

CHARACTER PROFILES

"I am to goblins what goblins are to us."
—The Three Holy Totem of the Earth Mother

GOBLIN SLAYER
A strange adventurer active on the frontier. He is famous for reaching Silver (3rd) rank hunting only goblins.

"Protect, heal, save."
—The Three Holy Totem of the Earth Mother

PRIESTESS
Works with Goblin Slayer. A sweet young woman who must put up with her partner's antics.

"Before they're polished, jewels and precious metals all look like rocks. No dwarf would judge a gem by its appearance alone."

DWARF SHAMAN
A dwarf spell caster who adventures with Goblin Slayer.

"A naga does not run."
—First of the "Seven of Steel"

LIZARD PRIEST
A lizardman priest who adventures with Goblin Slayer.

"Train yourself: kill with the blade. If blood flows, let it be the enemy's." —First of the "Seven of Steel"

HEAVY WARRIOR
A Silver-ranked adventurer associated with the Guild in the frontier town, along with Female Knight and his other companions, his party is one of the best on the frontier.

"Ignorance is bliss, for learning is the highest joy." —Elf proverb

HIGH ELF ARCHER
An elf girl who adventures with Goblin Slayer. A ranger and a skilled archer.

The only things that matter to her are the weather, the animals, the crops...and him.

"How can you go adventuring without pen and paper?"

COW GIRL
A girl who works on the farm where Goblin Slayer lives. The two are old friends.

GUILD GIRL
A girl who works at the Adventurers' Guild. Goblin Slayer's preference for goblin slaying always helps her out.

"Only a tattered skin awaits those who carelessly spin tales about love or the universe's mysteries...not to mention a woman's beauty."

WITCH
A Silver-ranked adventurer at the frontier town's Adventurers' Guild.

"I won't make friends tomorrow with an enemy I respect. I'll do it today."

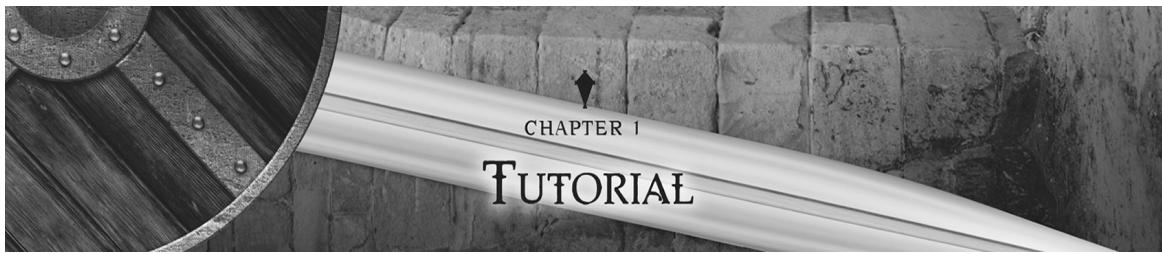
SPEARMAN
A Silver-ranked adventurer at the frontier town's Adventurers' Guild.

"Love does not consist in gazing at each other, but in looking outward in the same direction." —A poet

SWORD MAIDEN
Archbishop of the Supreme God in the water town. Also a Gold-ranked adventurer who once fought with the Demon Lord.

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O adventurer,
what tragedy that you should die.
Scant space there is on a tombstone.
O adventurer, your name I do not know,
but though you have not left it to us,
O adventurer, if you call me friend—
O my friend,
what tragedy that you should die.



“It went that way!”

A voice, clear as a bell, could be heard even over the blizzard that engulfed the battlefield.

It came from a young woman with sparkling blue eyes and beautiful, honey-colored waves of hair tied in two pigtails. She was an adventurer, but the nobility she displayed would not have been out of place at some lavish party.

Her face, which she might have covered in makeup at some point in her life, now ran with anxious sweat despite the surrounding snow. A cuirass protected her generous chest, while leather armor cradled a waist so slim she didn’t need a corset.

A silver sword glinted in her hand, a valuable family heirloom. It was made of aluminum, light and sharp, forged by a lightning-hammer against a red gem.

Thrust, thrust, block. She would repeat the motions she’d learned, again and again, and the enemy would have no hope of getting near her.

Beside her, a female warrior dove into the fray, speaking roughly but with an undercurrent of affection.

“I know! Just make sure you don’t slip and fall on the ice!”

“Gosh! I’m not that much of a klutz!”

That remained to be seen. The female warrior wore only thin armor, and pointed ears peeked out from beneath hair the color of leaves in autumn.

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The half-elf brandished her thin sword; it flashed as she moved with steps like a dancer. The other girl, Noble Fencer, had chased off one enemy, and she wouldn't miss the opening the foe's fear afforded them.

"ORARARARAG?!"

"GAROARARA?!"

First one, then two, of the ugly little creatures died, dirty blood spewing from their chests, viscera exposed to the open air.

In the whole world, there was probably not a single person who wouldn't recognize these monsters. Non-Prayers with dark green skin, crooked teeth, and the intelligence of cruel children. The weakest monster to walk the land: goblins.

They were visible here and there through the blizzard, growling or dribbling drool. They wore nothing but animal pelts over their bare skin; it wasn't clear whether this was because the cold didn't bother them or because they didn't know any better way to warm themselves. For weapons they carried only stone axes or clubs, along with some crude spears made from shafts of bone.

Yet even so, they made no move to run from the adventurers. The goblins felt nothing but hostility, hatred, and lust for them.

"They're so pathetic, it's almost funny," Noble Fencer said with a cute little snort.

"Heh-heh! Nice work, girls!"

A voice came from somewhere, sounding easy, unperturbed by the whipping snow.

The bright, almost innocent tone of it drew a frown from the half-elf.

"We're not here to chat! Get to work!"

"Sure thing."

With no sign or sound for warning, a dagger appeared, sinking into the space between a goblin's ribs.

A backstab, straight through to the heart. The creature's

eyes went wide, and it dropped dead.

The corpse shifted from a little kick from behind; it fell forward, revealing a diminutive rhea scout. He braced himself against the body and pulled out the dagger he had buried in it.

But however stupid goblins may be, even they wouldn't overlook an opportunity like that.

"Hrgh?!"

"GORBBB!!"

"GROOOB!!"

The monsters closed in, relying on their numbers for strength, waving their clubs. Giving a great yell, the rhea scout jumped backward.

"Don't be getting distracted on the battlefield, now!" A small but sturdy figure pushed past the scout to protect him. The dwarf wore a monk's habit and had the look of a boulder. His weapon of choice was a war hammer. The block of metal smashed mercilessly into a goblin's skull, sending brains flying everywhere, releasing the creature's nasty little soul to the afterlife.

"Well, I'm very sorry, Lord Monk!"

"Think nothing of it," the dwarf replied evenly, brushing an eyeball off his hammer. "Hey, spell casters. We've still got one or two in the distance there."

"Of course. I can see them perfectly well."

The response came from a middle-aged wizard dressed in the plainest of pure white robes. The human had an incongruous smile on his face while he stroked his own forehead as if to imply his abundant wisdom. A hand emerged from his robe, quickly forming a sign, while he brandished his staff with an expert gesture.

"My dear noble girl, perhaps you could lend me a hand?"

"You've got it!" Noble Fencer puffed out her chest and nodded. On her lovely finger was a ring that shone with a jewel, and she and the wizard spoke words of true power together.

“Sagitta...quelta...raedius! Strike home, arrow!”

“Tonitrus...oriens...iacta! Rise and fall, thunder!”

The words overwhelmed the very logic of the world, and the twin spells assaulted the goblins: the wizard’s Magic Missile sent several supernatural arrows flying, while Noble Fencer’s Lightning spell thundered down on them, turning snow to steam.

Afterward, the only goblins that remained were filled with holes or fried to a crisp. The ground had been laid bare by the attack, but the snow continued to come down without mercy. It would only be a matter of time before the earth was covered again.

“Well, I guess that’s it,” the half-elf warrior said, shaking the blood off her blade and sheathing it.

Rhea Scout whistled. “Aren’t you in a good mood.”

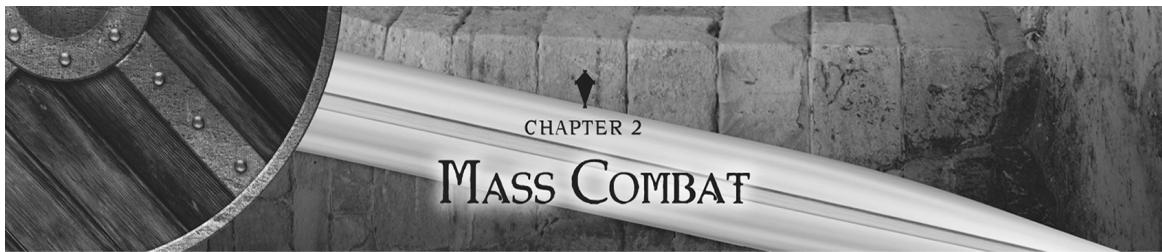
“Can’t say I’m very happy about you letting your guard down,” Dwarf Monk said reproachfully, but the wizard broke in, “Oh, spells cure all ills. It turned out all right in the end.”

The party, having successfully survived a random encounter with a group of goblins, once again patted themselves on the back for their battle prowess. They had cooperated well, and no one had been hurt. True, they had resorted to some spells, but still, a flawless victory.

The adventurers’ eyes burned with a passion that resembled both hope and ambition at once. Behind them was the northern village and all its defenseless residents, who lived under the threat of monsters. Ahead of them was the mountain, dangerous and severe but majestically white and snowcapped nonetheless. Somewhere on its slopes was the entrance to an underground cave.

It didn’t matter if they had to fight goblins. In fact, all the more reason to go. If goblin slaying wasn’t adventuring, what was?

“Yeah, don’t worry,” Noble Fencer said boldly, her golden hair whipping in the wind. She turned to her fellows and announced, “I have a plan!”



Dear Goblin Slayer,

I hope this letter finds you well. The season of snow sprites has come, and the cold with it. An adventurer's health is his most important resource at this time of the year. Please take care not to get sick.

As for me, I'm surprised but happy to say that after our last encounter, I have had no dreams of goblins, and in fact, things have been quite peaceful. It's all thanks to you and your friends. I send you my heartfelt gratitude. I should like to have written sooner and am embarrassed that I cannot even plead busyness to excuse the belatedness of this letter.

Nor do I feel it's quite appropriate for me to immediately trouble you again—so I must ask your forgiveness, for that is exactly what I intend to do. It so happens that there is a quest I would like to ask you to take on.

It's a common enough story: a certain young noblewoman fled her parents' house to become an adventurer. She took on a quest, after which all communication from her ceased—a sad, but also not uncommon, outcome. That one of her parents visited the Guild to offer a quest to find the girl isn't special, either.

The one thing I wish to note is that the quest the girl had undertaken was a goblin-slaying one.

I'm sure you see where this is going.

The search quest her parents filed specifies that "the most reliable, high-ranked adventurers" should apply. But of course, hardly anyone in the advanced ranks takes on goblin-slaying quests. When the Guild consulted me on the matter, I could think of no one besides you.

Knowing you, I'm sure you're quite busy (I heard about what went on at the harvest festival), but if you should have a few spare moments, I would ask that you use them to extend help to an unfortunate young woman.

I pray for your good health and safety.

Yours,

"It's from Sword Maiden. She says she's praying for you... Human letters are so passionate." An elf's cheerful voice sounded brightly on the winter road.

The road stretched on and on across the windswept plain. The only things that could be seen were dead trees and snow-covered shrubs all the way out to the horizon. The sky had been painted a dull gray by great, broad strokes of cloud; there was nothing of interest to look at anywhere.

In this drab world, the elf's lively, happy voice stood out. Her thin form was cloaked in hunter's garb. A bow was slung across her back, and her long ears twitched playfully.

High Elf Archer's catlike curiosity was by no means limited to adventures. She gave the letter in her hand a jaunty fold, gripped it in her long fingers, and passed it back behind her.

"I haven't seen many letters. Are they all like this?" she asked.

"Hmm..."

The human girl she passed the letter to gave an ambiguous smile, looking a bit shy. Even as she took the piece of paper, she seemed hesitant to read it.

Her willowy body was covered in mail, over which hung clerical garments, and in her hand, she held a sounding staff: she was a priestess. That was it—this missive had the whiff of a love letter. It would be wrong to say she didn't wonder about it, but she also didn't quite feel comfortable reading someone else's mail. If someone did it to her, she would find it very difficult to come back from.

"But... But it has gotten very cold, hasn't it?"

So instead, she resolved to change the subject of the conversation, by force if necessary.

The farther north they got, the heavier the clouds in the sky became, until sunlight couldn't penetrate them. The wind was growing bitter, and sometimes it brought

something white with it.

It was winter. That was made obvious enough by the snow that had started to pile up along the road.

"I'm chilly," Priestess said. "Maybe it's my own fault. Mail isn't going to help me keep warm..."

"This is why metal products are no good!" High Elf Archer gave a triumphant chuckle and stuck out her little chest, her ears bobbing up and down proudly. It was true: her hunter's cloak had nothing metal on it.

"Pipe down," a dwarf spell caster said. "Frankly, I'm amazed you're comfortable in clothing so thin."

"What's that I hear? Are elves tougher than you thought?"

"Tough and *slow to catch colds* are different things, lassie," the dwarf said, stroking his beard, provoking an angry "What?!" from the red-faced elf.

Their friendly argument was just as boisterous as ever. Priestess smiled. "Some things never change!"

"Mm," a massive lizardman nodded from beside her. "I envy them the energy to make such a commotion." The blood of his ancestors, the fearsome nagas, flowed in his veins—and he was from the southern tribe. Lizard Priest's scaly body shivered in the freezing cold of the snow.

Priestess found this hard to watch and looked up at him with worry. "Are you okay?"

"It's a question of my ancestors, who were equally vulnerable to cold. I could be facing extinction." Lizard Priest rolled his huge eyes and his tongue flicked out of his mouth. He continued in a joking tone, "Milord Goblin Slayer seems calm enough. You've had a good deal of experience of this, I suppose."

"...No."

Lizard Priest had spoken to a human warrior who led the column. He wore grimy leather armor and a cheap-looking steel helmet. A sword of a strange length was at his hip, and a small, round shield was tied to his arm. Even a novice

adventurer would probably have had better equipment.

Goblin Slayer: that was what people called this adventurer, a man of the third rank, Silver.

The only thing that was different from usual was the crudely wrought arrows he held in each hand.

"I first learned my trade on a snowy mountain." He worked on the arrowheads as he walked, not looking back at his companions.

"Oh-ho," Lizard Priest said admiringly. "Not a kind of practice I could imitate." His tail swished.

Goblin Slayer didn't slacken his pace as he said, "I wouldn't want to do it again."

As ever, there was no hesitation in his stride; he walked boldly, with an almost nonchalant violence.

"Um, Goblin Slayer, sir!" Priestess came rushing up to him with little steps like a small bird, clutching her staff in both hands. "Thank you, um, for this." Apologizing for making him interrupt his work, she passed the letter back to him. It was a good opportunity, since High Elf Archer and Dwarf Shaman were still occupied with arguing.

"You understand the gist of the quest?" He held the arrows in one hand, blithely taking the letter with the other and folding it up. Priestess caught a brief glimpse inside his item pouch as he put the letter away. As usual, it was stuffed with all manner of seemingly random things. But for him, there was an order to it, an organization, and he no doubt considered everything in there to be necessary.

Maybe I should try to organize my items a little more carefully, too...

Priestess made a mental note to ask him about it and nodded. "Um... We need to rescue the woman, right? From the goblins."

"That's right." Goblin Slayer nodded. "In other words, it's a goblin-slaying quest."

And that, more or less, was all there was to it. Shortly after the harvest festival in the frontier town, a letter had

arrived from the water town. It was from the archbishop of the Supreme God there—known as Sword Maiden—and just as before, it addressed Goblin Slayer by name.

This eccentric adventurer would certainly not turn down any work involving goblins. And so Priestess, who had brought word to them from the temple, along with High Elf Archer, Dwarf Shaman, and Lizard Priest, headed north with Goblin Slayer.

It was early afternoon, and they would soon arrive at the little village at the foot of the snowy mountain.

“I hope the girl’s all right...”

“Yeah. I hate to think about it...” High Elf Archer, apparently having tired of arguing, waved her hand as if to shoo away the awful idea. Her tone was light, but her drooping ears spoke for the sadness she felt. “Honestly, I doubt any goblin hostage is safe.”

“Well... Uh...”

Priestess and High Elf Archer gave each other stiff smiles, and it was clear what they were remembering.

“If she’s alive, we’ll rescue her. If she’s dead, we’ll bring back part of the corpse, or her personal effects.”

Such horrors, of course, were by no means the special province of goblins. Be it goblins or be it a dragon, no adventurer was safe in the clutches of any monster. So Goblin Slayer’s response was perfectly natural. He spoke in a quiet, detached—almost mechanical—voice. “Regardless, we’ll kill the goblins. That is the quest.”

“...There’s got to be a nicer way to say all that,” High Elf Archer said with understandable annoyance, but Goblin Slayer didn’t appear to notice.

“What can we do?” Priestess said with a little shrug and a helpless smile.

Lizard Priest broke in with fortuitous timing, not that he was necessarily trying to make things easier on the girls.

“I wonder what reason goblins would have for attacking a village in the middle of winter.” His huge body shivered,

almost theatrically, as if to emphasize the cold. "Would it not be more pleasant for them to stay quietly in their caves?"

"Well, Scaly, it's just like with bears, isn't it?" Dwarf Shaman answered, stroking his white beard. He unstoppered the flask at his hip, taking a swig and then holding it out to Lizard Priest. "Here. Warm up your insides a bit."

"Ah! You have my gratitude." The priest opened his huge jaws and took a gulp, then replaced the stopper and handed the flask back to Dwarf Shaman.

The dwarf gave the container a shake, listening to the slosh to judge how much was left, then put it back at his hip. "Y'need plenty of food and drink and sweets stored up to make it through the winter."

"Oh? Then it seems like autumn would be a better time to attack a village." High Elf Archer spun her finger in a circle in the air and, with all the confidence of the ranger she was, said, "That's what bears and other hibernating animals do."

"But even bears sneak out once in a while in the winter," Dwarf Shaman said. "What about that?"

"Sometimes they don't have a choice, like if they can't find a good cave to sleep in, or if the harvest was poor in the fall."

No one knew more than elves when it came to hunting and trapping. So much so that even the argumentative dwarf could only mutter, "I suppose that makes sense," and nod.

The conversation caused Priestess to put a finger to her lips thoughtfully and mutter, "Hmm." She felt like she had all the pieces in her head. Now she only had to put them together...

"Oh!" she exclaimed when the insight struck her.

"What's up?" High Elf Archer asked.

"Maybe," Priestess answered, "it's exactly because the harvest festival is just over."

Yes, that has to be it. Even as she spoke, she grew more

and more sure.

"The harvest is over," she went on, "so the storehouses in the villages and towns are full. And the goblins—"

"—want it all for themselves," Lizard Priest said, finishing her thought.

"Right," Priestess said with a small nod.

"I see. So even goblins are capable of the occasional logical decision."

"More likely they're just trying to cause the most possible trouble," Dwarf Shaman said, tugging at his beard.

"No," Goblin Slayer said, shaking his head. "Goblins are stupid, but they're not fools."

"You sound pretty sure about that," High Elf Archer said.

"I am," Goblin Slayer said, nodding this time. "Goblins think of nothing but stealing, but they do apply their intelligence to their theft."

He took a close look at the arrows he had been working with, then put them into a quiver at his hip. He appeared satisfied with the work he had done as they walked. "I've experienced it."

"I see..." Priestess said with some admiration.

High Elf Archer threw in her own *hmm*, but it wasn't his words she was interested in. What had drawn her attention were the bow and arrows—which she normally considered her own specialty.

"...So, Orcbolg, what were you doing with those arrows?"

"Preparing them."

"Oh, really?" She reached out with a motion so smooth it could barely be sensed and took one of the arrows out of the quiver.

"Be careful." That Goblin Slayer stopped with a warning and didn't scold the elf showed he was used to her curiosity. He did, however, sound somewhat annoyed.

High Elf Archer sniffed in acknowledgment and inspected the arrow. It was a perfectly normal cheap bolt. The quality was not remotely comparable to an elvish arrow. The head

had a murky sparkle in the winter sun. High Elf Archer tapped it lightly with her finger.

“Doesn’t seem like it’s poisoned or anything...”

“Not today.”

“Aw, be nice!” The elf frowned at the brusque words but made a sound of interest as she turned the arrow around. “The arrowhead isn’t fastened securely. It’s gonna fall off, you know.”

And indeed, it was just as High Elf Archer said. Perhaps because of Goblin Slayer’s fiddling with it, the tip of the cheap arrow was no longer fixed in place. Even if he managed to hit his target, the arrowhead might well break off, and it would almost certainly come down at the wrong angle.

“Orcbolg, you are hopeless.” High Elf Archer gave a broad shrug and a shake of her head, adding, “Sheesh,” for effect.

She decided to ignore the dwarf behind her, who said, “You’re showing your age.”

“Here, give me that quiver. I’ll fix them for you.”

She held out her hand, but Goblin Slayer just looked at it. Then he said, “No,” and shook his head. “They’re fine.”

High Elf Archer stared at him blankly. “How’s that?”

“Because we don’t yet know where the goblins are sleeping this time.”

“And that’s connected to these arrows how?”

It makes no sense!

When there was something High Elf Archer didn’t agree with, she could be awfully prickly about it.

They had known each other for nearly a year now. Goblin Slayer sighed. “When the arrow hits, the shaft breaks off, leaving only the head.”

“So?”

“The head will be poisonous.” He held out his hand. High Elf Archer grunted and politely returned the arrow. Goblin Slayer put it gently back in the quiver. “So long as they don’t take it out, but simply go back to their hole, their flesh

will begin to rot, and the sickness will spread.”

And goblins had no knowledge of medicine—at least for now.

A cramped, dirty nest. Wounds that wouldn’t heal. Rot. A wasting disease. That meant...

“It probably won’t kill them all, but it will be a major blow.”

“As usual, Orcbolg, your plan makes no sense to me,” High Elf Archer muttered, her face drawn. Beside her, Priestess looked up to the heavens as if in distress.

Gods. O gods. He doesn’t mean ill...well, except to goblins. But please, forgive him.

It was much too late for her to be shocked at anything he said or did, but still, she felt compelled to offer the occasional prayer.

Goblin Slayer, moving at a quick clip, looked at her. “Are you that surprised?”

“...Er, well, uh...” Priestess couldn’t quite decide where to look. “I mean, this being you, Goblin Slayer, sir...”

“Is that so?” he said quietly, evoking a laugh from Lizard Priest.

“Do not let it bother you. It is certainly most like milord Goblin Slayer.”

“True, it’s not like we had any illusions about how Beardcutter thinks.” Dwarf Shaman took the flask from his hip and took a swig of wine to ward off the cold. Fire wine could practically burn; it was enough to put the smell of alcohol in the air.

High Elf Archer choked quietly, pinching her nose with one hand and waving away the smell with the other. Dwarf Shaman wiped some droplets from his beard.

“We’ve still got no answer to our original concern,” he said.

“Original concern?” Goblin Slayer asked. “Which one is that?”

“There’s no way the girl is unharmed.”

"You mean the chances that the kidnapped girl is still alive."

"Right." He looked at Goblin Slayer and wiped more vigorously at his beard. "They're apt to eat her, aren't they? Otherwise they only have another mouth to feed. They've no reason to let her live through the winter."

"Winter is long," Goblin Slayer said, nodding. He spoke coldly. "They'll want something to pass the time."

Not much later, they noticed a single column of smoke rising from the village at the base of the mountain.

§

"Orcbolg...!"

High Elf Archer was the first to speak, her ears twitching.

Down the road, not far away, some smoke was rising. Perhaps it was from a cook fire? No.

"Goblins?"

"A village. Fire. Smoke. The smell of burning. Noise, screams... It seems likely!"

"So it's goblins."

Goblin Slayer nodded in response, and without a moment's hesitation he took the little bow off his back. Moving quickly now, he tugged on the string with a practiced hand, then nocked an arrow and drew.

No one had to give the order: the entire party followed after him immediately. The goblins attacking the village were hell-bent on thievery; they hadn't even posted any sentries and didn't yet know of the approaching adventurers.

How would the party punish the goblins for foolishly giving them such an advantage?

"Goblin Slayer, sir," Priestess said seriously, despite her hard breathing and a face drawn with nervousness, "should I prepare my miracles...?"

"Do it."

"Right!"

Priestess had been an adventurer for a year already. True, all she had done was slay goblins, but the density of her adventures was far greater than most novices. That was why she didn't have to ask which miracle to prepare but only whether she ought to get ready. She had, after all, known Goblin Slayer longer than any of the other party members.

"O Earth Mother, abounding in mercy, by the power of the land grant safety to we who are weak."

She held her sounding staff to her chest and prayed imploringly to her goddess. It was an activity intense enough to shave away part of her soul. A true miracle, one which allowed her consciousness to touch that of the gods in heaven.

A faint but pure light came down from the sky, embracing Goblin Slayer and Lizard Priest. This was the miracle Protection, which had saved Goblin Slayer and the others in more than one moment of crisis.

Lizard Priest ran, kicking off the ground, narrowing his eyes as the phosphorescence surrounded him.

"Hmm! Your Earth Mother is indeed capable of miracles. If she were a naga, perhaps I would convert to her worship. Now, then..."

He had already finished his prayer to his terrible forebears, the nagas, and a fang polished like a blade was in his hand. Lizard Priest had agility enough to charge the foe at any moment. Now he looked suspiciously at the village and called out, "Milord Goblin Slayer, shall we attack the goblins or protect the villagers?"

He answered calmly, "Both, of course."

High Elf Archer let out an admiring exhalation. She looked every inch the tracker as she ran along, bow in hand.

Even as he assessed the situation himself, Goblin Slayer said to Lizard Priest, "How does it look to you?"

"...Not very good, I fear." The lizard was a veteran warrior priest, and his judgment carried the ring of authority. "I

don't hear the clanging of swords. That means the battle is over; they're focused on stealing now."

"If they think they've won, that will make them vulnerable. We don't know their strength, but..."

But that was normal for this party. Goblin Slayer didn't hesitate.

"We go in from the front."

"Dragontooth Warriors?"

"No. I'll explain why later." Then Goblin Slayer picked up his pace. Priestess had her hands full trying to keep up, while Dwarf Shaman stuck out his chin, running along as fast as he could.

Goblin Slayer was not one to deceive. If he said he would explain, then he would. That was why none of the party members objected. Anyway, there wasn't time to argue. Their party didn't have a leader as such, but when it came to fighting goblins, who else were they going to follow?

"Don't use potions. But don't hold back with your spells."

"You've got it!" The answer came from their spell caster, Dwarf Shaman. "I s'pose it's up to me which spells I use?" As he dashed along as fast as his little legs would carry him, the dwarf was already reaching into his bag and rifling through his catalysts.

Even if there were a great many enemies, the chances of one who could use magic were slim—and not just because they were dealing with goblins. It was simply the way of the world. The fact that three of their five party members were spell casters was a sign of how blessed they were.

"Yes, I'll leave it to you." Goblin Slayer nodded, then glanced at High Elf Archer. "Find high ground and see what's going on. You'll be our support."

"Sounds good." She gave a smile of satisfaction like a happy cat. With an elegant motion, she prepared her huge bow and set an arrow.

Everything was ready. Keeping his eyes forward as they advanced, Goblin Slayer said, "First, one."

An arrow flew soundlessly through the air, burying itself in the base of the skull of a goblin who stood lolling at the entrance to the village.

“ORAAG?!”

The brain-dead goblin pitched forward, but it wasn’t clear whether any of his companions noticed.

“N-nooo!! Help—help me!! Sis! Big siiiiis!!”

For at that moment, they were busy dragging a girl out of a barrel where she’d been hiding. She screamed and kicked, but they had her by the hair; the goblins didn’t seem to have grasped the situation yet.

At the same instant that the first goblin fell dead, bud-tipped arrows began to fall like rain, sprouting from eyes and necks.

“Hey, Orcbolg! No fair starting early!” High Elf Archer, her lips pursed, offered almost as many complaints as she did arrows. Once she had shot down the goblins, she jumped, from barrel, to pillar, to roof. It was a feat that could only have been possible for an elf, born and raised in the trees, an incredible display of acrobatics.

“What? Huh...?” The village girl stared in disbelief.

As Goblin Slayer ran up, he said briefly, “We’re adventurers.”

The girl was still young—she could hardly have been older than ten. Her clothes were plain but made of fur; she had clearly been well cared for. When she saw the silver tag that hung around Goblin Slayer’s neck, her eyes welled up with tears.

Silver. That meant an adventurer of the third rank. An adventurer’s rank represented his abilities, as well as how much social good he had done. It was the most important form of identification on the frontier.

Goblin Slayer wasn’t distracted for a second; he looked around, speaking quickly. “Where are the goblins? How many are there? What happened to the other villagers?”

“Er, um, I—that is, I don’t... I don’t know...” Terror and

regret drained the color from the girl's face, and she shook her head. "But—everyone—they all assembled in the village square... My older sister, she said... She said to hide..."

"I don't like it," Goblin Slayer spat, readying a new arrow from his quiver. "I don't like any of it."

His whisper contained a wealth of emotions. Priestess gave him a searching glance, but it didn't stop her from kneeling in front of the young girl.

"It's all right," she said. "We'll help your sister, I'm sure of it."

"Really?"

"Really!" Priestess pounded herself on her little chest and gave a smile like a blooming flower. She patted the shivering girl gently on the head, looking into her eyes as she showed her the symbol of the Earth Mother. "See? I serve the goddess. And—"

Yes, and.

Priestess shook her head. The girl followed her gaze as she looked up. The grimy armor. The cheap-looking helmet. A human warrior.

"And Goblin Slayer would never lose to a goblin."

Goblin Slayer glanced at the girl and Priestess, then glowered at the village, where the sounds of thieving could be heard.

"The enemy still hasn't noticed us. Let's do it."

"Wait—there is danger." Lizard Priest somberly offered his view of the situation. "Goblins or not, the enemy seems to be organized. We must not presume too much."

"Their willingness to attack in broad daylight suggests there may be advanced types of goblins with them," Goblin Slayer said.

So perhaps they should not let any information get back to the nest.

After a moment, Goblin Slayer took the arrows, meant to kill slowly, and returned them to his back. In exchange, he drew the familiar sword with its strange length.

"I don't want to risk any of them escaping, but it will be difficult to keep them bottled up in the square."

"In that case, let me handle the town square—take 'em all out with magic." Dwarf Shaman pounded his belly like a drum.

"Hmm," Goblin Slayer murmured, rolling the goblin corpse onto its back with his foot.

A crude pelt. For a weapon, a hatchet it must have stolen from somewhere. Its color was good; it showed no sign of starving.

"It depends on the numbers." Goblin Slayer grabbed the hatchet from the goblin's hand, fixing it at his hip. He looked up and saw High Elf Archer waving from the rooftops. Her long ears were twitching; she must have been trying to read the situation by the sound.

"Five or six of them in the square!" she called out in a clear, carrying voice, and Goblin Slayer nodded.

"How many are there in the village as a whole? Even just that you can see."

"There are lots of shadows, so it's hard to count. But I'd say not more than twenty."

"So this is just an advance unit," Goblin Slayer said and quickly began to formulate a strategy.

Assume there were fewer than twenty goblins, including the three they'd killed earlier. There were six in the square. That meant fewer than fourteen around the perimeter, engaged in looting. It was only a guess, but it probably wasn't far off.

In the face of large enemy numbers, splitting your own force was the stupidest thing you could do, but the situation was what it was.

"We split up. Square and perimeter."

"In that case, I shall head to the square with master spell caster," Lizard Priest offered.

"All right." Goblin Slayer nodded.

High Elf Archer, who had heard the conversation from her

place on the rooftop, spoke without taking her eyes or ears off the village. "I guess I'll run support for you, dwarf!"

"Sounds good, Long-Ears!" Dwarf Shaman took a swig from his flask and wiped his mouth on his gauntlet, then he pounded Lizard Priest's belly like a drum. "Right then, Scaly! Shall we go?"

As he left, Lizard Priest thumped Goblin Slayer on the shoulder with one powerful hand. "I wish you success in battle, milord Goblin Slayer."

"....."

Goblin Slayer said nothing but finally nodded and began to move. His stride was nonchalant, but his footsteps made no sound. He was approaching the side of the house, where Priestess was with the little girl they had saved.

"...Is the girl all right?"

"Yes. I think she's a little less frightened now..." Priestess gave an optimistic smile. Across from her, the girl was curled up on the ground, fast asleep. Adventurers had come, and she had told them about her sister—perhaps she needed a break from consciousness after all that.

"What should we do...?"

"We have no more time to worry about her."

"Oh..." But before she could say anything more, a rough, gloved hand picked the girl up. Goblin Slayer deposited her in the nearby barrel. Then he pulled a blanket from his bag and laid it over her. She wasn't exactly safe, but this was the spot her older sister had chosen. Perhaps it would help her relax.

Where were the Earth Mother and the Supreme God that they would not answer the prayers of a little girl?

"...This will have to do," Goblin Slayer muttered.

"Right," Priestess said with a little nod. Her right hand held her sounding staff, but the left wandered through the air, until she placed it hesitantly on Goblin Slayer's back. "I'm sure...it's fine."

"...Yes." Goblin Slayer nodded. Then he strengthened his

grip on his sword, raised his shield, and looked ahead. The village was burning, and there were goblins to slay. "Let's go."

"Yes, sir!" Priestess answered without hesitation while gripping her staff with both hands. She would not object to anything he asked her to do. After all, he was the person who had saved her life.

She was all too aware that her abilities were not yet great, that she was still woefully inexperienced. But even so—

"Don't worry. I'll watch your back!"

Thus, the battle began.

§

Goblin Slayer and Priestess slid like shadows along a snowy path lined with log houses. The sun, peeking intermittently through the clouds, had already begun to sink, and soon it would be twilight. The goblins' hour. This village didn't have much time left.

Priestess gulped air as she ran. "I've never fought...in a village before..."

"There aren't nearly as many obstacles as in a cave. Watch the shadows and watch out for attacks from above." Even as he spoke, Goblin Slayer lifted his sword and flung it. It flew through the air, piercing the chest of a goblin who had scrambled up onto a rooftop.

"ORAAG?!"

The creature screamed and tumbled to the ground. Goblin Slayer pulled a hatchet from his belt. A flick of his wrist brought it down harder than a one-handed sword. He buried it in the skull of the goblin writhing on the ground.

"GAAROROROOOOOOORG?!"

It gave a long, choked death knell. Goblin Slayer seemed pleased by the sound. Not bad.

"That makes four."

"Since there are six in the square, that means less than

ten left, doesn't it?"

Priestess squeezed her eyes shut, offering a prayer to the Earth Mother that the tiny demon might not lose his way on the road to the afterlife.

All mortal beings died once and once only; in this, everyone was the same. Death was the kindest and most equal thing in this world.

"Yes. And we don't have much time to search." Goblin Slayer jogged up to an intersection, then moved close to Priestess as if asking her to watch his back. To be suddenly so close to him—her heart began to race, even though she knew this was entirely platonic.

"They'll have noticed the scream. They'll be coming soon. Get ready."

"Oh, r-right!"

Priestess nodded, gripped her sounding staff firmly, and brought her hands together at her chest.

Perhaps it was all the running and the nervousness that accounted for her elevated heart rate and her strangely hot face. There was no time for idle thoughts now, she told herself.

"Watch your feet. If you slip on the snow, you'll die. And watch out for poisoned blades."

"Right. Um..." Priestess looked at him questioningly. Cover. Overhead. Her feet and poisoned weapons. "So what you really mean is... Just watch out for everything, like usual."

"Mm," Goblin Slayer grunted.

She felt him nod rather than saw it, and it brought a smile to her face.

"That's not much in the way of guidance."

"Sorry."

"Gosh. You... You really are hopeless, aren't you?" She giggled, but it was mostly in hopes of masking how scared she was.

This was only one of many times when she and Goblin

Slayer had fought together, just the two of them. But it was, perhaps, the first time she had been in the front with him like this.

Their party included five people now. Goblin Slayer was their only front-line specialist, but Lizard Priest was a fighter as well. A rearguard specialist like herself had very few chances to experience the full brunt of combat. She had to admit that every once in a while, she had grown impatient being protected by everyone else, but still...

It doesn't matter. I have to make sure to do my job.

And anyway, she appreciated that everyone looked out for her.

She gripped her staff even tighter; she saw forms moving, obscured by the drifting snow.

“Looks like they’re here...”

“Make small movements with your weapon. All I need is a distraction. I can strike the finishing blow.”

“Yes, sir...!”

And then there was no more time for conversation.

The goblins, seeing that their opponents numbered only two, and one of them a woman, assaulted the intersection from all four directions at once.

“GAAORRR!!”

“GROOB!!”

“Five...!” Goblin Slayer said, striking the first goblin to attack with his hatchet as easily as if he were chopping firewood.

“GOROB?!”

The monster fell to the ground, the hatchet still buried in his forehead. Without slowing down, Goblin Slayer turned his shield on the creature to the left. The sharpened, polished edge doubled as a weapon, and it evoked a strangled cry from the second goblin when it split his head open.

The second creature stumbled back. Goblin Slayer didn’t hesitate to grab the dagger the goblin had stashed in his

dirty loinloth.

“Hrr!”

He kicked the goblin in the stomach and sent him flying, then channeled the momentum into throwing the dagger he had stolen. It flew straight to a goblin who was rushing toward them with a pike. The creature began to claw at the dagger that had suddenly sprouted from his throat, then collapsed.

“Six.”

He stepped on the body of the first goblin he had killed and pulled out the hatchet, then promptly planted it in the head of the unfortunate second creature, who had been struggling to get up.

“Seven!”

The fight was many against only two—but one of those two was Goblin Slayer. He focused on what was in front of him, leaving his otherwise vulnerable back to Priestess. There were no walls for the monsters to attack from; he could see in all four directions, and that was all he needed. There was no enemy easier to overpower than goblins who had left their territory.

“Hah! Yah!”

Priestess, sweat beading on her forehead, was making small, quick movements with her staff. They were not unlike the dance she had learned for the ritual she performed at the festival; she drew on her long hours of practice as she fought.

She wasn’t dealing the goblins any serious blows; she was just keeping them at bay. Making sure they stayed back. Giving them something to think about. She only wanted to ensure they didn’t get too close. She might have been able to keep them back even farther if she made larger swings, but that risked one of them finding an opening, and then it would all be over.

Besides, I’ve got Goblin Slayer behind me.

He was watching her back, and she was watching his. She

felt both relief and a sense of duty, the two mingling in a strange excitement.

“Ah...!” Suddenly, she felt Goblin Slayer begin to move to the right. Without a moment’s hesitation, she followed him. They turned, as if in a dance, so that he was now facing where she had been.

“Eight... Nine!”

Goblin Slayer’s hatchet began mowing down the goblins Priestess had held off. No matter how many times she heard it, the girl could never quite get used to the sound of a heavy blade cutting through flesh and bone. Especially not when she was faced with goblins, their eyes alight with greed and hatred, crawling over the corpses of their companions to get at her.

The bone-chilling terror of that first adventure still hadn’t left her. And it likely never would.

“Ya—ah?!”

There was a *thock* as one of the goblins caught the end of her sounding staff. A moment’s struggle soon began to tell in favor of the goblin. Even the weak monster could overpower Priestess’s thin arms. With his strength, the goblin could easily pull her off her feet, claw at her throat.

Priestess went pale; the image of one of her former party members, a female wizard who had met a gruesome end, flashed in the back of her mind.

“O Earth Mother, abounding in mercy, grant your sacred light to we who are lost in darkness!”

“GORRUURUAAAA?!?!”

But she wouldn’t let it end that way. She had gained a great deal of experience since then. The Holy Light miracle seared the goblin’s eyes without mercy. The creature fell back, clutching his face, and Priestess’s staff nearly jumped back at her.

The miracle didn’t do any damage, but everything had its uses. Those without imagination were the first to die. That was something she had learned from Goblin Slayer.

"Ten...!"

And Goblin Slayer, of course, was not one to miss a goblin who had left him an opening. The hatchet seemed to trade places with her; it sliced clean through the goblin's throat. The monster spasmed and rolled on the ground. Its neck hung at a strange angle. Another blow. The last one.

Goblin Slayer produced this pile of corpses as naturally as breathing. Now, he turned expressionlessly to Priestess.

"Are you hurt?"

"N-no."

His question was as direct as always. Priestess quickly patted herself down to be sure. Even if she didn't think she was injured, it was possible she had sustained a graze somewhere. With the goblins using poisoned weapons, even a small wound could be deadly.

"I—I think I'm all right."

"I see." Goblin Slayer nodded. He inspected the bloody hatchet and gave a soft cluck of his tongue. It wasn't greasy, but the blade was beginning to dull from cutting through so much bone. He tossed it away and, for the second time, drew the little bow on his back.

Almost as an afterthought, he said, "Holy Light. That was a good choice."

"Huh...?" It took her a moment to figure out what he was talking about. *Is he...praising me?* "Oh! Uh—um, th-thank you...?" *He really is, isn't he?*

She felt a happy warmth start in her cheeks, but before it could spread any further, she suppressed the smile that loomed. "Heh-heh."

Just that little chuckle escaped her. This was no time to savor the compliment. Instead, she kept her face neutral, gripped her staff almost imploringly, and offered up prayers for the dead. Goblin Slayer wouldn't stop her from doing that.

"Three earlier, seven here, and this one makes ten." He had an arrow ready and was scanning the area.

Close inspection of the mud- and blood-soaked path revealed a number of bodies on the ground. Most of them were human, but several were goblins. The villagers must have resisted. The monsters appeared to have been killed with hoes or similar farming tools. There were two—no, three more—goblin corpses.

“The final count is thirteen, then.”

Goblin Slayer went around kicking each of the bodies to be sure they were dead. One of the corpses dropped a dagger; he picked it up and put it in his belt. He wasn’t discriminating when it came to weapons. A single stone could kill a goblin. Even barehanded, there were ways. Still, there were times when a real weapon was the decisive factor. It was important to collect whenever the opportunity arose.

“We said there were five or six in the square, as I recall.”

“That would make eighteen or nineteen total, right?” Priestess had finished her prayers; she stood up, brushing the dust from her knees.

Goblin Slayer’s expression was hidden behind his helmet, but Priestess, for her part, looked confused. “Not quite twenty...”

“I don’t like the way they’re keeping all their hostages in one place, either. Nor do I like how the corpses of the villagers who fought back appear unmolested.”

Priestess put a finger thoughtfully to her lips, then murmured, “It’s not very...goblin-like, is it?”

Many things had happened in caves and ruins and other deep places that she didn’t want to recall. But whenever and wherever goblins overcame their enemies, they tended to have their sport with them right then and there. They saw such places as their nests, so to speak. Territory where they could relax. And the more someone fought back, the more violent and cruel the goblins became.

Goblins were cunning and cowardly, mean and vicious, and above all they were loyal to their appetites. They

probably didn't even know what it meant to put off gratifying their own desires. For them to take hostages on enemy ground, and then continue looting without laying a hand on their captives...

"Do you suppose there's another ogre or dark elf behind this?"

"I don't know," Goblin Slayer said. "It could just be goblins."

He spoke in a manner very characteristic of him; for some reason, Priestess found this reassuring. Goblin Slayer was a little twisted, a little strange, a mite bizarre, and certainly stubborn. She had often been in a great deal of danger during her year with him. And sometimes, she felt that she couldn't leave him alone or that he was hopeless.

"You might be right," she said, and her voice was very gentle. But then...

"Huh...?"

Something tickled her nose, a barely detectable odor on the wind. A sweet, stimulating aroma much like alcohol.

"He must be using Stupor," she said.

"So he decided to put the hostages and the goblins all to sleep." Goblin Slayer looked around, then toward the town square, where the smell was presumably coming from. Indeed: smoke was rising from the area, too much to have been caused by anything but magic.

"Very efficient."

"Ha... Ah-ha-ha-ha..." A tight smile came over Priestess's face, and she looked away.

Nothing more efficient than putting an entire nest to sleep. Sure...

She thought the words but didn't say them.

§

"Orcbolg, I thought you'd never get here!"

"Did you?"

High Elf Archer had her little chest puffed out; Goblin Slayer answered her with a hint of annoyance. When he and Priestess had arrived, the town square was already in his party's hands.

All the goblins' loot had been piled up around the hostages. The villagers themselves, dozens of them gathered in the center of the square, were still asleep, but as far as Goblin Slayer could see, no one was hurt. Having confirmed this, he nodded once.

Next, he turned his attention to the goblin corpses.

"Six of 'em here for you." Dwarf Shaman had dragged the bodies to one spot and was now wiping his hands with a look of disgust. "Aagh! Gods above, but goblins do stink."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure they stink or sure they're dead? The answer's yes, in any case. All the ones my spell hit anyway. How're you doing, Scaly?"

"Mm." Lizard Priest, who was still watching vigilantly on the other side of the square, nodded gravely. "I took three apart with my claws and fangs. Mistress ranger shot three with her bow. Six between us. No mistake, I believe."

"I see. Nineteen, then," Goblin Slayer muttered, reaching into the mound of corpses. He was checking whether any of the dead goblins had been carrying a sword.

He found one and extracted it, checking the blade, and when he found it was acceptable, he put it in his sheath. At last he seemed to calm down.

"Uh, hey, Orcbolg. Where's the girl?" High Elf Archer's complaint from earlier seemed to be forgotten. When she said *the girl*, she could mean only one person.

"I sent her to bring the child."

"Do you think she'll be all right?"

"Yes." Goblin Slayer nodded. "I don't think there'll be any issues. That's been my experience, at least."

He looked once more at the villagers. He located the person who looked both the oldest and the best dressed and

strode over to him.

“Are you the village chief?”

“Er, well, yes. Who are all of you...?” He looked at Goblin Slayer, suspicion multiplying the wrinkles in an already elderly face.

Goblin Slayer answered by showing his level tag.

“We’re adventurers.”

“Adventurers... And you’re Silver-ranked...”

The village headman blinked several times, then understanding entered his eyes. “Could you be the Goblin Slayer...?”

“Yes,” Goblin Slayer murmured, evoking a shout from the headman.

“Oh-ho! I am so, so glad you came! Thank you! Thank you...!”

The grateful old man took Goblin Slayer’s hand in his own two hands, which looked like gnarled tree branches. His hands and arms, once built up by farmwork, no longer had their former girth or strength. Yet Goblin Slayer could certainly feel the handshake as the man moved his hand up and down.

“There are some things I want to ask you.”

“Certainly. Anything.”

“First of all, do you have an herbalist or healer in your village? A cleric of some kind? One capable of miracles.”

“Ahem... We rely on visiting priests when we need a cleric. As for an herbalist, well, we have one...” The headman looked apologetic. Perhaps he thought the adventurers would ask for some payment, or at least support. “But she’s only a young woman. She became our medicine woman just recently, when her parents died in an epidemic. She isn’t...”

“I understand,” Goblin Slayer said immediately, as if this were perfectly natural. “We’ll help care for the wounded. My party—” He paused for a second. “—has two clerics.”

“Wha...?”

“I’m sorry to say I can’t spare any potions.” He tapped his

item pouch. The little bottles inside rattled. “If what you say about your medicine woman is true, I doubt she’ll be of much help. We can only offer you some miracles and first aid.”

When Goblin Slayer asked, “Does this upset you?” the headman shook his head vigorously. The suspicion in his eyes had turned first to amazement and then to respect.

Wandering minstrels told wondrous tales of an adventurer who rushed to the aid of any village that was attacked by goblins; in their songs, this hero was well-spoken and beautiful. Had there been even a shred of truth in what they sang?

“Ha-ha-ha! I see now why you prevented me from creating a Dragontooth Warrior,” Lizard Priest said, approaching the two of them.

“Frontier people are superstitious,” Goblin Slayer said. “Especially about bones.”

“How thoughtful of you.”

“I was the same way, once.”

Lizard Priest rolled his eyes in his head by way of acknowledgment. “True. Naga or no, many might believe that only a necromancer could control a skeleton warrior.” Then he said, “We must classify the injured by the severity of their wounds,” and with a wave of his tail, he was off.

The lizardmen had always been fighters. As a race, they often made for superior medics.

“I’m surprised,” High Elf Archer muttered, watching the exchange from a distance. She had her bow in her hands at last and was scanning the area, but she was trying hard to keep Goblin Slayer in the corner of her vision.

He was seated among the villagers now, tending to them with items he took out of his bag. He was bandaging wounds with herbs that would stop bleeding and neutralize poison, applying pressure to the injuries. Even here, he seemed somehow different.

“I’m sorry, thank you so much.” Beside him, a woman in

robes was bowing her head—the medicine woman they'd spoken of, perhaps.

High Elf Archer's pointy ears twitched, and a catlike smile came over her face. "It turns out Orcbolg really can hold a conversation, when he wants to."

Beside her, Dwarf Shaman stroked his beard and nodded. "Well, Beard-cutter is the most well-known of all of us." Unlike his elf companion, who was on guard duty, with the fighting over, the dwarf had next to nothing to do.

Not that he was unhelpful. He didn't know first aid, but he walked around with many little items that served as catalysts for his magic. One of them was fire wine, which he described as "good for drinking and good for healing." It was a powerful spirit, which also made it an excellent disinfectant. He had given a jar of it to the medicine woman, who had accepted it with profuse thanks, to the shaman's distinct embarrassment. The way of the dwarves was to remember debts and gratitude as well as grudges while not sweating the little things.

"Goblin Slayer, the most beloved adventurer on the frontier... Isn't that the song that made you recruit him?"

"Well, yeah, sure. But it turns out the song and the reality don't have much in common..." High Elf Archer puffed out her cheeks in displeasure as she thought back on the ballad she had heard.

It said he was made of the sternest stuff, that he was taciturn and loyal. A man without greed, who wouldn't spurn even the smallest reward. When goblins appeared, he would go to even the most remote and rustic places to meet them, and his sword would slay them all. He was held up almost as if he were a saint or a Platinum rank.

"But when you really think about it... He does get along really well with that girl at the Guild."

"They say those who don't know the true situation are quick to jealousy. It's the same everywhere." Dwarf Shaman glanced up at the elf with a teasing smile. "So you really

shouldn't envy her just because she puts to shame that anvil you call a chest."

He could practically hear the anger seize High Elf Archer's face.

"After all, unlike a certain cleric girl, elves take a century or two to develop!"

"Oooh, I can't believe you said that! You great wine barrel of a—!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Among dwarves, a nice figure is a requirement for a proper man!"

And they were off and arguing, the same as usual—but it wasn't a sign that they had let their guards down. Dwarf Shaman hadn't taken his hand off his bag of catalysts, and High Elf Archer's ears were still moving, listening. She heard the two approaching sets of footsteps.

One was a child, the other the familiar footfalls of Priestess. High Elf Archer knew all this full well.

"Big Siiiiis!"

"Oh...!"

A glow came over the face of the medicine woman, who had been moving among the wounded. The little girl came running to her, and the medicine woman caught her with both hands, hugging her to her chest. They both burst into tears, paying no heed to the eyes around them.

Goblin Slayer watched this in silence, until at length, he looked away. He could no longer look because Priestess, who had gone to get the child, had a bright smile on her face for some reason.

"What is it?" he asked.

She squinted a little at the blunt question and replied innocently, "Heh-heh. Oh, nothing... I was just thinking you looked...happy."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, it is."

"Is that so.....?"

Goblin Slayer checked to make sure his helmet was still in

good condition. There was no smile on that visor.

"Well, fine. See to the treatment of the villagers. And the funerals."

"The funerals..." Priestess put a thin, pale finger to her lips, thinking for just a second. "The only funerary rites I know are those of the Earth Mother. Do you think it'll be all right?"

"I doubt they'll care. So long as it's the ritual of a god of order."

"Okay. Leave it to me," Priestess responded promptly, then she looked around and moved off, holding her sounding staff. "Sorry I'm late!"

"Ah, you've come." Lizard Priest, tending to an injury with his rough, scaled hand, turned his head on his long neck to look at her.

"Yes," she said with a firm nod and began pulling bandages and ointments out of her pack. "I still have one miracle left, so if there are any serious injuries, I can use Minor Heal on them..."

"In that case, I shall leave this patient to you. He seems to have been severely beaten, and all my artifice has done little."

"All right!"

When she had lived at the Temple, Priestess's job had been the treatment of wounded adventurers. As she rolled up her sleeves and began bustling among the injured, she projected more authority than her years would suggest.

Goblin Slayer followed her with his eyes, mulling over a question in his mind.

Surely this can't be the end, but...?

"Orcbolg!"

The entire party looked up at the sharp and clear warning from High Elf Archer.

It must have been watching from the shadow of a barrel. Now, it had jumped out from the shadows and was dashing down the road—a single goblin trying to make his escape.

He ran like a frightened hare; nearly slipping and stumbling, growing ever smaller in the distance.

But only for a moment.

"Pixies, pixies, hurry, quickly! No treats for you—I just need tricksies!"

Dwarf Shaman intoned the spell Bind, and a rope wrapped itself around the fleeing goblin like a snake. It caught him around the legs and sent him crashing to the ground.

This was all the opening High Elf Archer needed. "You thought we'd let you get away?!" In a motion dramatic enough for a painting, she drew the great bow off her back and jumped. From barrel, to wall, and then into space, she took leap after leap, aiming at her target.

"So it was twenty...!"

That was when Goblin Slayer drew an arrow from his own quiver. "Don't kill him! We want him to take the poison home and spread it!"

High Elf Archer reached up and grabbed the arrow out of the sky in an acrobatic movement. An instant later, the arrow whistled off, looking like a beam of light. The elf landed on the ground at the same moment as, in the distance, the goblin tumbled. How she had loaded, drawn, and fired the bow in that time, no one knew. It was truly a skill so advanced that it looked like magic.

"Happy now?" She returned her oaken bow to her back as she landed.

"Yes. But..." Goblin Slayer was almost muttering to himself, his gaze fixed on the goblin in the distance. He had pulled the shaft out of his shoulder and cut the rope around his legs and was running off again. He was heading north—toward the snowy mountain from where an icy wind blew.

"...this is not over yet."

That was something the whole party knew well.

The goblins had gathered the villagers in the square because they had wanted to go looting; they gathered their

spoils in the square, as well. And yet, they hadn't touched the women. That meant they had been planning to take them back to their nest. The twenty goblins who attacked the village were only an advance unit. There were more of them, though there was no knowing whether they would launch a fresh attack or simply withdraw.

Goblin Slayer completed his calculations and issued his conclusion without reluctance:

"As soon as our spells have been replenished, we go on the attack."

He knelt before the village headman seated on the ground, then looked him in the eye. The headman's face was drawn at the thought of another battle, but Goblin Slayer only said, "I want to request preparations for a night attack, as well as a place to rest for a night. You don't mind?"

"Wh-what? N-not at all! If we can do anything to help you, just let me know..."

"Then tell me about the party of adventurers that came before us. And do you have any trackers in this village?"

"Y-yes, so we do. Just one... He's young, but he's here."

"I need to know the geography of the mountain. I want a map, even a simple one."

The headman was nodding eagerly, but then he seemed to think of something, and an obsequious smile came over his face. "Oh, but... When it comes to a reward, we can't..."

"The goblins are more important," Goblin Slayer said flatly. Ignoring the stunned headman, he stared at the mountains to the north. Somewhere behind the veil of clouds, the sun had already sunk behind the peaks, and the fierce wind carried hints of night.

"As soon as everything's ready, we will go and slay them."

§

Thankfully, all things considered, damage to the village was minimal. Of course there were those who had been injured or

killed fighting against the goblins. Some houses had been torched, others smashed—naturally. But the adventurers had arrived before either the loot or the captured women were carried off to the nest. So perhaps it was for the better. Or at least, Priestess thought so.

And yet... And yet, she couldn't quite embrace this as the best possible outcome, she thought, as she looked out over the village's cemetery.

Once they had finished tending to the wounded, she, the medicine girl, and Lizard Priest had to deal with the burials.

"O Earth Mother, abounding in mercy, please, by your revered hand, guide the souls of those who have left this world."

Sounding staff in hand, she murmured her prayer, making the holy sign as each body was put into the ground and covered with earth.

This was the obvious thing to do, even if there weren't a risk of the corpses becoming undead if they were left exposed. If the living failed to say farewell to the dead, how could they go on with their lives? These burials were less necessary for the dead than they were for the living.

So long as the dead had been among those who had words, their souls would be called to the god each of them believed in. Thus, the world would keep turning.

"I doubt an attack will come tonight, although I can't be certain," Goblin Slayer said, after he had left the villagers to complete the burials. "You must be exhausted. Rest."

As usual, his speech brooked no argument—and yet, Priestess at least understood that this was his way of showing concern. Even if she still thought him a rather hopeless person.

No matter how often she chided him, he never learned. Indeed, if she had refused, he wouldn't have listened. So she figured it was best just to go along with him, despite the flash of annoyance.

"Ahh... Phew."

That was why she was currently relaxing in a warm bath. She exhaled, the breath seeming to come from everywhere in her body, each muscle relaxing.

She was in a hot spring. The snowy mountain nearby had, it seemed, once been a volcano, and the fire sprites still heated the water through the earth (or something like that).

The hot spring sat beneath a roof on stilts, surrounded by rocks as steam drifted gently upward. The familiar stone icon of the Deity of the Basin presided over the wash water. But it depicted two faces, perhaps because this was a mixed bath open to both men and women. For that reason, Priestess had carefully wrapped herself in a towel.

As she settled into the murky water, however, her body, so long stiffened against the cold, seemed to melt. She couldn't stop the relaxed groan that escaped her.

"Mmmmm..."

High Elf Archer, it seemed, was a different matter. Her slim body, not a scrap of covering on it, looked as gossamer as any faerie. Yet she kept shuffling around the edge of the bath, looking like a frightened rabbit. She would clench her fists, determined, then hesitantly dip a toe in the water before jumping back.

"Oooh... Ohh... Are you sure about this?" She looked like a child who didn't want a bath—in fact, she looked much like the younger clerics Priestess knew, and it brought a smile to her face.

"I'm telling you, it's fine. It's just a spring with some hot water."

"It's a place where the sprites of water and earth and fire and snow all come together. That really doesn't bother you...?"

"Should it? I think it feels wonderful..."

"Hmmm..."

High Elf Archer's gaze flitted between herself and Priestess, and her ears twitched uncertainly. After a time, she suddenly bit her lip, and—

“Y-yaah!”

“Yikes!”

—all but flung herself into the pool, causing a great splash that crashed down on Priestess.

“Pff! Pff!” High Elf Archer, who had gone under up to the top of her head, surfaced looking like a bedraggled cat, spitting and squeezing water out of her hair. Finally, she looked at Priestess with an expression of surprise and then let out a breath.

“...Huh. This water’s warm. It’s kind of...nice.”

“Gosh! Isn’t that what I’ve been trying to tell you? ...And you’re *not* supposed to jump in.”

“Sorry about that. I was just too scared to do it any other way.”

“...Hee-hee.”

“...Ha-ha-ha!”

They looked at each other, both of them soaked from head to toe, and broke into cheerful laughter.

No matter how high a rank an adventurer achieves, the anxiety of battle never goes away. High Elf Archer might have been Silver-ranked, but she was still young and inexperienced; and Priestess, all the more so. They may have been from different races, but emotionally they were about the same age.

They sat beside each other, looking up at the sky. The stars were blacked out by thick, leaden clouds, and only a shadow of the two moons could be seen.

He had said once—when had it been?—that goblins came from the green moon.

The girls’ clothing was piled neatly beside the bath, along with the weapons and tools they had used in the earlier battle. Goblin Slayer had warned them to be wary of a surprise attack while bathing.

Maybe he wears that armor and that helmet even in the bath...

The image was just too funny and set the girls giggling

again.

"I wish everyone else would've joined us," Priestess said.

"Oh, you know. 'Mud is more amenable to a lizard.' Seriously, who washes themselves in mud?" *I just don't get lizard folk.* Priestess's smile widened at the elf's impersonation. "And the dwarf was all, 'Wine is the way to revive your spirits!' As for Orcbolg..."

"...Guard duty. Of course." Priestess blinked, her eyelashes moistened by the steam, and hugged her knees. "I'm a little worried, though. He won't take a rest..."

"Yeah, well, he's got all that energy. Got to kill the goblins, he says."

"Doesn't that...seem strange to you?"

Sure does was a conclusion both of them could agree on. It was easy to picture him, keeping watch on the snowy plain and muttering, "Goblins, goblins."

"If we left him to his own devices, he'd spend his whole life like that," High Elf Archer said.

"I think...you're right." Priestess nodded deeply in response.

It was really true. Goblin Slayer had changed considerably in the year since she'd met him. As had she. But still...

"Well, it's thanks to falling in with him that I get to visit the North like this, so I guess I don't mind," the elf said. She splashed restlessly at the water as if buying time to think. The motion stirred up the steam. Priestess glanced at her.

"Um... You said you left home because you wanted to see what was beyond the forest, right?"

"Uh-huh." High Elf Archer stretched out her arms and legs, relaxing. Priestess shifted how she was sitting. "We say, 'You're alive until you die,' but if all you ever know is the woods, what's the point?"

"I can't even imagine living for thousands of years."

"It's not such a big deal. It's like being a huge, old tree. You're just...there."

It wasn't a bad thing in and of itself. High Elf Archer traced a circle in the air with her pointer finger. Priestess naturally followed the movement with her eyes. Even the smallest of elf gestures was polished and refined.

"So," Priestess said, sliding down in the water to hide the embarrassment of how taken she was with the movement. "You left because...you got bored? I mean, I hear that happens a lot..."

"You're half-right." She paused. "It's true, I felt there was something I had to do."

She related how she would hunt overpopulated animals and return them to the earth, pick fruit where there was too much, to wet her throat, and generally keep her eyes fixed on the cycles of nature.

It's enough to make your head spin. There's always work to do. And the forest never stops growing. But you know what?

Here, she winked and smiled mischievously. "One time, I saw a leaf being carried along by a river. And I wondered, where does it go? And then I couldn't stop wondering." She laughed.

She had rushed back to her home and got her bow, and then she was off among the trees, quick as a deer, chasing that leaf. When she next looked around, she realized she had left the woods. She jumped from rock to rock across the stream bed, following the leaf.

"And...what did you find?"

"Nothing interesting, I can tell you that," she said, squinting her eyes like a contented cat. "A dike. One the humans had built. It was the first time I had ever seen one—I thought it was pretty interesting." The leaf, carried along by the stream, had gotten caught in the dike.

It was hardly as though she had received some revelation. High Elf Archer smiled faintly. Then she opened her lips ever so slightly and whistled. She was humming a song in her clear voice.

*What is it that waits at the end of the river?
What is it that blooms where the birds do fly?
If the womb of the wind is beyond the horizon
Then where does the rainbow come down from the sky?
Far must we walk to discover the answers
But fair are the things on the way that we find*

Priestess blinked, eliciting a satisfied “Heh!” from High Elf Archer.

It was said there was no race so elegant as the elves.

High Elf Archer glanced at Priestess’s chest and produced a sigh.

“You still get to keep developing... Lucky you.”

“Er... Wha?!” Priestess could only produce a series of strange noises, and her face went completely red. “Wh-what are you talking about?! And all of a sudden like that!”

“We’re talking about time. The passage of time. That’s what the song was about, and that’s what my comment was about.”

She snickered. It sounded like a bell ringing in her throat. As she laughed, she reached out and ran a hand through Priestess’s soaked hair.

“I mean... Me, I still have some time, but...”

“Just some?” Priestess looked down, not resisting the hand in her hair.

Yeah, High Elf Archer nodded. “Humans... They get old and die after just a hundred years or so, right?”

“Uh-huh...”

“I wonder why everyone can’t live for a long time. Maybe it’s something that would make sense to me if I were human.”

“...If you were born as a human, you’d just wish you were as beautiful as an elf,” Priestess murmured. She didn’t regret who she was, but there was always the fascination of *if*, the unanswered wish.

That day, for example. She had fought side by side with

Goblin Slayer; he had watched her back. What if she could have fought more? What if she were more accomplished in miracles or spells? Would she have been more help to him?

She had once promised that if he was in trouble, she would help him. Had she done that today? At this rate...

If we left him to his own devices, he'd spend his whole life like that.

She felt as though a reckoning was coming, one that couldn't be avoided.

“...”

“And if you'd been born an elf, I bet you'd wish you were human.” High Elf Archer punctuated her remark by giving Priestess's head a little hug before letting her go. Priestess thought she could just catch the scent of the forest filling her nose.

Surely she was imagining it. This place was supposed to be home only to earth and water and fire.

But... What if she wasn't imagining it?

The elves must be connected to the forest even when they leave it behind...

“You're probably right,” Priestess said and let out a breath. She felt as though something deep in her heart, something stagnant and stiff, had begun to give way.

“Should we think about getting out?” she asked. “We don't have much time to just hang around.”

“True.” High Elf Archer stood abruptly. “The world just refuses to play nice, doesn't it?”

§

“The situation doesn't look good,” Goblin Slayer said. He was standing in front of a crackling fire in the village tavern. The second floor was an inn, which was typical of such places.

The warmth of the fire filled the log building, shadows from the trophies on the wall dancing in the firelight. The

adventurers, back from their respective relaxations, sat around a large table with cups filled to the brim with mead.

The medicine woman and her sister, along with nearly everyone else in the village, had urged their rescuers to lodge in their respective homes, but Goblin Slayer had refused.

"We will all pay for a place at the inn. Divided, we can't respond quickly to whatever may happen."

Priestess was slightly mystified by the rush of relief she felt when he said that.

Now the villagers surrounded the adventurers at some remove. They were half-expectant and half-curious. Some also eyed the party's women with undue interest. Priestess shifted uncomfortably under their leering gazes.

I guess it's a small blessing there's no one who looks like any real trouble...

"Do you think...they don't want us here?" she asked, looking at the food on the table.

Boiled potatoes, regular potatoes, potatoes, potatoes... Everything on offer was potatoes. Priestess, of course, by no means expected to live in luxury. She was used to humble fare. And yes, it was winter; there was snow on the ground and it would be necessary to conserve provisions. But still—nothing but potatoes?

"Nah," Dwarf Shaman said with a shake of his head. "From what I heard, the last adventurers to come through bought up all the supplies."

"Everything?"

"Said they needed it to slay goblins, if you can believe that." Dwarf Shaman rested his chin on his hands.

"Ha-haa! I suppose..." Lizard Priest's tail swished along the ground as if to say that it wasn't theirs to judge. "It's said one must draw out goblins before one can slay them. A little bit of coercion, you see. Perhaps they really did need those supplies...?"

Hmm. Priestess put a finger to her lips in thought, her hair

flowing in a wave as she tilted her head quizzically. It was clear who to go to with a question like this.

“Was it necessary?”

“It depends on the time, and the place, and the circumstances,” their goblin-slaying specialist replied flatly. “Now and again, you’ll encounter wandering tribes with no nest. Pursuit can take considerable time.”

“But time’s something we don’t have, right?” High Elf Archer said, lapping happily at the mead. Her cheeks were already a faint red; the bath might have had something to do with it, but it was chiefly the alcohol. “We don’t know what’s in the nest, and we don’t know how many of them there are. Plus, there’s the possibility that the other adventurers are still alive.”

“We’re only lucky that the villagers weren’t taken away. Who knows if we could have helped them in time?”

Goblin Slayer nodded, then unrolled a sheet of lambskin paper on the table. “We can’t wait until the sickness from the arrows becomes fatal, but they may be somewhat weakened by now.” On the paper was a simple map of the route from the village to the mountain; he had asked the local hunter to draw it. Some scribbled notes appeared to have been added by Goblin Slayer himself. “According to the trapper, this is the most likely place for a goblin nest.”

“Yeah, but...” High Elf Archer ran a finger over the map, measuring the distance between the village and the cave. “If no villagers were kidnapped, why didn’t we go in right away?”

“I believe I know what the previous adventurers were planning.” The room’s collective gaze fixed on Goblin Slayer. He took a fried potato and put it in his mouth. His helmet moved slightly, emanating the sounds of chewing and swallowing. “The medicine woman told me that the party bought wood along with their other supplies.”

“Wood?” Dwarf Shaman asked. “But they could just—no, wait, don’t tell me, I’ll get it.” He took a swig of mead,

ignoring the look the elf gave him as he brushed several droplets off his beard.

The wise old dwarf grunted to himself, and a moment later he snapped his fingers and said, "Ah! I know now! It's not firewood, so it isn't about filling the nest with smoke. They were preparing for something. And they brought food. Meaning..."

"Yes," Goblin Slayer said as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "They meant to starve them out."

There was an audible *crack* from the fire. For a time, no one talked. Lizard Priest picked up a poker and jabbed listlessly at the firewood. There was another noise as the wood split in two, sparks flying.

"But then, the foe is many and they were few," he said.

"That tactic has its uses," Goblin Slayer said dispassionately. "But not when you are attempting to exterminate a large number of enemies on their own land."

Priestess pictured the scene, her body going stiff. The terror of facing down starving goblins for days on end.

I don't think I could bear it.

Then Priestess thought of the villagers. How they had asked for adventurers to stop the goblins stealing food from them, and this party had decided on a tactic that used the whole town's provisions.

"We cannot prepare even one sword, one potion, or one meal's worth of food on our own." *Glug.* Goblin Slayer took a drink of his mead without even having to remove his helmet. "And adventurers without supplies will be dead by nightfall."

"Orcbolg, maybe you could think about something else for once."

"I'm trying."

Glug, glug. More mead.

His four companions watched this with the faintest of smiles on their faces. They knew this party would never have been formed if this man were not exactly the way he was.

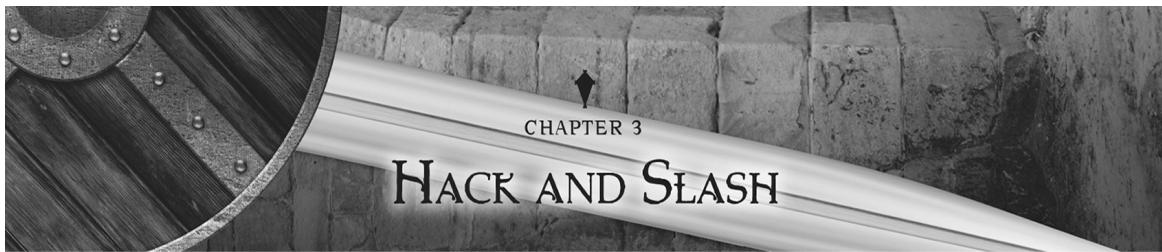
"And milord Goblin Slayer," said Lizard Priest, who was used to the role of military adviser by now. "What strategy do you have in mind?"

"None to speak of." He sounded uncharacteristically relaxed.

They had no idea how the nest was laid out or how many enemies were there. Not knowing if the other adventurers were still alive, they couldn't simply destroy the nest outright. And if the goblins had attacked once, they would surely come a second and a third time.

Thus, there was only one possible strategy.

"We blitz them."



The adventurers left the village at dawn. They had wanted to reach the nest as soon as possible, but night belonged to the goblins. True, the “white darkness” reigned both day and night here, but there was no reason to hand an advantage to their opponents. There was no objection to leaving town at the moment when the scales between safety and danger were most evenly balanced.

No objections as such anyway...

“Ooooh... It’s so c-c-c-cold...!” High Elf Archer whined, her long ears trembling as they walked among the snowdrifts. She was accustomed to life on her feet, but her first time on a snowy mountain was still something of a surprise.

A rope tied all the members of the party together. Scaling the snowy peak would not be easy. The fluffy white snow carpeting the ground was deep and cold, and if anyone was unlucky, their foot might find a place where there was nothing but loosely packed snow. There were spots with sharp fallen rocks, where a careless stumble could cost one’s life.

“Erm... Hrgh. Hmm. This is quite...”

“Are you okay...?”

“Oh... But of course...”

Lizard Priest, who came from the South, became even slower as he grew colder. He nodded at Priestess, who was looking at him with worry, and curled up his tail. Dwarf Shaman grabbed his hand.

“Hang in there a bit longer. I’m using Tail Wind to keep the blizzard off us. It could be worse.”

"Hmm. And I'm grateful." Lizard Priest nodded. "Milord Goblin Slayer, how does it look ahead?"

"No problems."

"That's reassuring."

Goblin Slayer was walking just a bit ahead of his four companions. He looked down the ridge of the mountain, comparing their position to the map in his hand.

"We're almost there."

Be that as it may, the scene before them was an uninspiring one. A dark hole marred the white landscape of the mountain. Waste was piled to one side of the entrance. It was certainly the sort of place that monsters would call home.

They were all thankful for Dwarf Shaman's Tail Wind spell, which enlisted the help of wind sprites to hold the blizzard at bay. Still—

"We need to get warm," the dwarf said. "Heeey, Beardcutter! All right if I start a fire?"

"Please."

"On it."

With skill befitting a dwarf, he pulled out some dry branches and struck a flint.

"Where did you find those?" Priestess asked.

"Under the snow, and then a little farther down. You'd do well to remember that."

They sheltered in a small cave they dug out of the snow so the goblins wouldn't see their fire. The sky, heavy with clouds, was still slightly dark; the sun was weak and far away.

"Sunset is near. When our bodies have loosened up, we'll go in." Goblin Slayer loosened the straps on his armor and set down his bag.

Priestess looked at him in surprise; she had never known him to remove his armor like this before. "Are you sure it's okay to be doing that?"

"If I don't spend at least a few minutes this way, my body

will never relax."

He took off his gauntlets, squeezing his rough but untanned hands mechanically.

"You should rub your arms and legs," he said. "If they're poisoned by ice sprites, they may rot and fall off."

"Eep!" High Elf Archer yelped. She knew as much about sprites as any of them, and maybe that made the thought even worse for her. With a frown, she began to work her fingers along her limbs.

"Your feet, too. Don't forget."

"Er, right!" Priestess took off her boots and socks and began rubbing her pale, slim toes. Her socks surprised her; they were soaked through and quite heavy. Perhaps it was a mixture of sweat and snowmelt.

I should've brought a second pair...

"How are you doing?" Goblin Slayer asked, looking at Lizard Priest. The monk's scaly face was as difficult to read as Goblin Slayer's but for an altogether different reason. Still, it was clear enough that he was practically frozen stiff from the cold.

Lizard Priest picked a bit of ice off his scales. "M-mm. Well, we've arrived anyway. Who knew there were such chilly places in the world?"

"There are others even colder than this."

"Incredible!"

He could well believe the rumors that his forebears had been annihilated by a deep freeze.

Quietly snickering at the lizard, Dwarf Shaman reached nimbly into his bag and pulled out a jar of fire wine and cups for the whole party. He began to pour.

"Here, here's some wine, drink up. It'll warm your innards."

"Wonderful. Mm, you know just the thing, master spell caster."

"Oh, stop it, you're embarrassing me. Here, some for you."

"Th-thank you," said Priestess.

"Thanks." High Elf Archer.

"I appreciate it." Goblin Slayer.

They each began to sip at their drinks. They were only seeking a bit of warmth; it would have been counterproductive to get drunk.

Without warning and for no perceptible reason, High Elf Archer brought the conversation around to Lizard Priest. "Hey, didn't you tell us that your goal was to raise your rank and become a dragon?"

The lizard's huge body was curled up as close to the fire as he could get, and the bag of provisions was in his hand. Perhaps he was hungry, or perhaps he just wanted a little taste of the cheese he was now taking out.

Lizard Priest didn't attempt to hide what he was doing but nodded importantly.

"Indeed; even so."

"A dragon who loves cheese, huh?" She took another sip from the cup in her hands and giggled.

"Better for the world than a wyrm that wants treasure or sacrifices of maidens," Dwarf Shaman said.

"At least he wouldn't have to worry about anyone trying to slay him. Can I have a piece of that?"

"Indeed you may."

They were within spitting distance of a goblin nest, still freezing despite their fire, but High Elf Archer was feeling a little bit warmer and in good spirits. She used an obsidian dagger to slice off a piece of the cheese Lizard Priest offered her, then tossed it into her mouth.

The food from that farm was delicious, as ever. Her ears twitched happily.

"Tell me the truth. Do girls really taste that good to dragons? Or is it some sort of ritual or something?"

"A fine question. Perhaps when I become a dragon, I shall understand."

"Are you... I mean, you don't have any doubts that you'll be able to become a dragon?" Priestess asked, sipping

hesitantly at her wine. A small sigh escaped her lips. “I mean...breathing fire and flying through the air... Maybe those are things you could do with miracles?”

“Heh-heh-heh! That’s how the old folk describe dragons, all right!” Dwarf Shaman had already drained one cup and was pouring himself a second. “But you can’t believe most of what old folks say anyway.”

“But in my hometown resided a great and terrible dragon that had turned to a skeleton. *And if apes can become humans, surely lizards...*”

Priestess smiled slightly at this grave murmur from Lizard Priest. Each person had their own faith.

“Oh, that’s right!” High Elf Archer said suddenly, snapping her long fingers. “When you become a dragon, you’ll be immortal, right? I’ll come visit you!”

“Oh-ho.”

“I mean, we’re talking at least a thousand years, right? You’ll get super-bored. You’ll go crazy without any friends to help you pass the time.”

She said seriously that she estimated at least 60 percent of the world’s rampaging dragons were just looking for something to do.

Lizard Priest nodded in acknowledgment. Then he tried to imagine what it would be like when he became a dragon.

“A dragon who speaks of the adventures of Goblin Slayer. One visited by a high elf.”

“And...one that likes cheese,” High Elf Archer put in.

This caused Lizard Priest to roll his eyes happily. “That sounds quite congenial.”

“Right?”

“But enough of that. A thousand years will pass in due course, and we must attend to what is coming now.” Lizard Priest turned to look at Goblin Slayer. “Milord Goblin Slayer, how shall we attack them?”

He had been listening to the conversation silently. Now he said, “Good question,” and immediately lapsed back into

thought. Then he said, "I think we should do as we usually do. Warrior in front, then ranger, warrior-monk, cleric, and spell caster."

"By the book," Lizard Priest said.

"That tunnel looks wide enough," said Dwarf Shaman, who had peeked around the snowdrift for a look at the entrance. "Perhaps two by three will do?"

Goblins had good night vision. The entrance to the nest yawned silent and dark. There didn't seem to be any guards. Was it a trap? A careless oversight? Or...

"Feh. My wine doesn't taste so good anymore," Dwarf Shaman said with a cluck of his tongue. He must have noticed that the waste at the entrance was more than just trash.

The body of an adventurer lay among the refuse. The corpse had been thrown away as if it were no more important than a broken-up fence. Her equipment had been stripped off; it was clear she had been much defiled, and her exposed remains gnawed on by beasts.

Cruelest of all, the adventurer appeared to be an elf woman. *Appeared*—well, she must have struggled, and the violence seemed to have continued after her death. Her ears had been cut down to the size of a human's, the tips stuck in her mouth. The goblins' twisted games knew no bounds.

High Elf Archer glanced at Dwarf Shaman. "Hmm? Something wrong?"

"...Naw. Nothing," he said bluntly. "But take my advice, Long-Ears, and don't go peeping around too much."

"I would never. Most of the time."

"Hey," Goblin Slayer grunted, and asked softly of Dwarf Shaman, "...was Gold-hair there?"

The dwarf shook his head slowly. He stroked his beard, took another look, then shook it more firmly. "Doesn't seem so, as far as I see."

"Then we may still have time," Lizard Priest said, and the other two men nodded.

Priestess shuddered, perhaps intuiting something of what their conversation portended. Goblin Slayer tapped her on the shoulder and said, "Let's go." Then he glanced at the girl's pale, bare feet. "Put on your socks and boots."

§

The shadow of the torch flame danced eerily in the wind. But the angle at which the tunnel had been dug meant that even just a step inside, one was sheltered from the snow and the wind; one could almost be warm. If it weren't for the smell of meat and excrement that drifted from within, the place could almost be cozy.

"Hmm. The path descends at a rather steep angle," Lizard Priest said, his tail swishing with interest.

"Yeah, but it goes right back up again over there," High Elf Archer said.

"Mmm."

It looked as if the goblins had dug down into the ground immediately upon beginning their nest and then come back up. The rather severe angles didn't seem natural; most likely, they had been made by goblin hands.

"Hmm. Quite a clever barrier against rain and snow," Dwarf Shaman said, showing his fine knowledge of construction. He glanced back over his shoulder at the entrance. "Any precipitation that blows in gets caught here and doesn't go any farther into the tunnels."

"Goblins make things like that?" Priestess said, blinking with perplexity or, perhaps, surprise. She well remembered what she was often told: that goblins were stupid, but they weren't fools. In other words, just because they didn't have much knowledge didn't mean they didn't think. But this...

"I don't know." Goblin Slayer's answer was dispassionate, almost mechanical. He drew the sword at his hip and used it to stir the pool of waste at the bottom of the depression. He clicked his tongue. "We can't say anything yet. All I can tell

you is, try not to step in the water.”

“Is there something in there?” Priestess asked.

“It’s a trap. There are stakes at the bottom.”

A pit trap, in other words. Rather than burying it, the goblins had hidden it at the bottom of a waste pool.

High Elf Archer, testing the depth of the pool with one of her bud-tipped arrows, frowned. “Ugh. That’s vile.”

“I need you to listen for enemies.”

“I know, I know. Leave it to me, I told you.” She jumped nimbly over the pool, but then winked mischievously and laughed. “I can’t stand getting so dirty too many times.”

A fragrant sachet hung around High Elf Archer’s neck to help keep away smells. She twitched her long ears with pride, but Goblin Slayer shook his head and said bluntly, “Getting dirty isn’t the point.”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha... Right, but, well, when you get that messy, it’s a pain to clean up... Right?”

Priestess heard the hollow note in the elf’s laugh. A similar pouch hung next to the status tag around her own neck. She may have gotten used to rubbing blood and guts all over herself, but it was never something she enjoyed.

Come to think of it, the pile of corpses next to the tunnel entrance was much the same. She had plenty of experience with goblins now, had seen this many times and fancied herself accustomed to it—but still. She needed more than a joke or a chuckle...

“Hey.” High Elf Archer, up ahead, glanced at her and nodded gently. She was the same way. Elves had exceptional sense perception. Seeing the flutter of the archer’s ears, Priestess nodded back.

“Let’s...do what we can.”

“Right.”

After going down and then up two or three more slopes, the party finally arrived at the cave’s main tunnel. The torch had nearly burned down, and Goblin Slayer replaced it with another from his pack.

"Hold this."

"Oh, yes, sir!"

He gave the smaller torch to Priestess, while he held the new one, which burned brightly.

The humans were the only members of this party, indeed, the only ones in this cave, who lacked decent night vision. In the light from the torch, Goblin Slayer examined the earthen walls intently.

They seemed to have been dug with some crude tool. They were rough but sturdy—a textbook example of a goblin nest.

The problem was elsewhere.

"I don't see any sort of totems."

"Does that mean there are no shamans?"

"I don't know." He shook his head. "I don't know, but I don't like it."

"Mmm... But wouldn't it be easier for us if they don't have spell casters?" High Elf Archer asked.

"It had begun to bother me as well," Lizard Priest said, opening his huge jaws. "The attack on the village, the skill with which they dispatched the previous adventurers. It would be hard to imagine that there are no brains behind this operation."

"Do you suppose it's another dark elf or an ogre?" Priestess asked.

"Or maybe...a demon?" High Elf Archer whispered with a petrified expression. The word echoed through the halls of the cavern, making their hair stand on end.

The adventurers looked at one another, and then Dwarf Shaman, stroking his beard, let out a breath. "Ahh, stoppit already. No sense getting all uptight over hypotheticals." He reached up (because he was very short) and slapped Goblin Slayer on the back. "This isn't exactly what we call 'striking a famous sword with a hammer.' But, Beard-cutter. We ought to focus on what we can do now."

"Yes," Goblin Slayer said after a moment. He raised the

torch and took another look at the wall, then nodded. "Were you alluding to a dwarven proverb?"

"I was," Dwarf Shaman said with a pleased sniff.

"I see." As Goblin Slayer set off walking with his usual bold stride, murmurs could be heard. "*There's no need to further forge a famous sword.*" And then, "*Hmm. Not bad.*"

The layout of the cave didn't seem too complex, and they followed the path for a while. There was no sign of goblins, only a pervasive stench of rot.

"I think I'm gonna be sick," High Elf Archer muttered, pulling her collar up over her mouth. Nobody else said it aloud, but most of the party seemed to sympathize with her —Goblin Slayer excepted.

Eventually they came to a T-shaped intersection. High Elf Archer immediately crouched down, inspecting the floor carefully for footprints.

"Lots of prints heading to the right," she reported, clapping her hands to get the dust off them. She couldn't always read man-made buildings, but in natural settings like this cave, her eyes were reliable. That suggested that to the right were sleeping quarters, with an armory or warehouse to the left. Or perhaps...

"Last time, we started with the toilet," Dwarf Shaman said.

"Correct," Goblin Slayer said. "It would be inconvenient to miss someone simply because he was using the bathroom."

"Same plan this time?"

"Mm," Goblin Slayer grunted.

Should they do the same thing they had done before? Was it safe to use the same strategy each time? What was the likelihood that the enemy would predict what they were going to do?

Imagine. Think. If a human's actual armaments were his first weapon, knowledge and planning were his second.

If he were a goblin, what would he do?

"We'll hit the right first." Goblin Slayer made his

determination without compunction. There was no debate.

High Elf Archer nocked an arrow into her great bow, while Lizard Priest prepared a fang blade. Dwarf Shaman had his bag of catalysts in hand, and Priestess gripped her sounding staff firmly.

They moved quickly through the tunnels, arriving at a large, hollowed-out living area. There before them was a horde of goblins, carrying shovels and pickaxes as if preparing for a surprise attack...

§

“O Earth Mother, abounding in mercy, grant your sacred light to we who are lost in darkness!”

With these words, Priestess seized the initiative. She did this through no special ability—*just a roll of the dice*. But the way she intoned the Holy Light miracle without hesitation was a sign of how much she had grown. She held up her staff, the end of which was host to the sacred miracle. A brilliant light filled the cavern.

“GORARAB?!”

“ORRRG?!”

The goblins, struck by the holy light, pressed their hands to their eyes and cried out. She counted ten—no, fifteen?

“Seventeen. No hobs, no spell casters. Archers present. Let’s go!”

For the adventurers, who had the light at their backs, the illumination was no problem at all.

“First blood is mine!” No sooner had Goblin Slayer issued his order than a bud-tipped arrow began to fly. High Elf Archer had drawn back the spider-silk string of her bow elegantly, releasing the three arrows she carried in a single motion.

The cavern may have been dark and confined, but that was no hindrance to an elf’s aim. Her skill was so advanced that it was hardly distinguishable from magic. Three goblins

collapsed where they stood: fourteen left. A hail of stones began to assail the remaining creatures.

"Come out, you gnomes, it's time to work, now don't you dare your duty shirk—a bit of dust may cause no shock, but a thousand make a lovely rock!"

Dwarf Shaman flung some sand into space, turning it into rocks that rained down on the enemy.

"ORGAAA?!"

"GROOROB?!"

The goblins howled and fell back. The Stone Blast spell assailed them indiscriminately, breaking bones and tearing flesh.

At this point, of course, spells that harmed the enemy and those that aided allies were both of use. It was Dwarf Shaman himself who had settled on Stone Blast, an offensive technique. Spells that struck an entire area were best while one held the initiative, before engagement with the enemy.

Ten goblins left. Screeching and weeping their vile tears, the monsters surged forward.

"Here we go! You're up, Beard-cutter! Scaly!"

"Hrrrooahhh!"

"Good."

One great roar and one curt reply: the two members of the party's vanguard stood blocking the entrance to the room. It was only logical that they not enter; when fighting a large number of opponents, it was wise to choose a choke point and defend it.

The enemy, which had outnumbered them nearly four to one, was reduced to half its strength. And only two or three goblins could stand abreast in the tunnel. Against the two warriors, and in light of the terrain, the fight was nearly even. It only went to show how crucial it was to take the initiative in combat.

After all, there would always be *more goblins than there were adventurers*. The fate of adventurers who sought to

face goblins without acknowledging that basic fact was a cruel one.

“GORROB!”

“Eeyahhhh!”

The goblins were still half-blind from the flash of light; their attacks were hardly worth worrying about. Lizard Priest struck out with claws and tail, dealing one goblin a mighty blow and rending another to pieces. Eight left.

Lizardmen respected animality—for it was a bestial nature combined with keen intellect that defined the nagas. Violent and brave, war cries mingling with prayers, Lizard Priest threw himself at the surviving goblins.

“Hmph.” Just beside him, Goblin Slayer stabbed the creatures in their vital places—quietly, dutifully, precisely.

Throat, heart, head. It didn’t matter. Humanoid creatures tended to have a great many weak points. Goblin Slayer personally preferred the throat. A stab there might not result in an instantaneous kill, but it would render the target helpless. He kicked aside a choking goblin and hurled his sword at another one farther away.

“ORAGAGA?!”

“Ten, eleven.”

His target collapsed, pierced through the throat. Even in the dark, his aim was exact.

Six left. Goblin Slayer shoved a club belonging to one of the dead goblins with his foot, kicking it up into his hand. He caught an ax blow from the goblin beside him with his shield, then aimed a strike of the club at the creature’s stomach.

“ORARAO?!” Something disgusting poured from the goblin’s open mouth. Goblin Slayer struck again. This made two more since his last count.

After dealing a vicious blow to the creature’s skull, Goblin Slayer nonchalantly swept the vomit from his shield.

“Thirteen. The enemy is going to recover soon.”

“Right!”

Four left. Hardly an excuse to take it easy, of course.

Despite the nervousness evident on her face, Priestess held up her sounding staff and invoked another of the soul-erasing miracles.

"O Earth Mother, abounding in mercy, grant your sacred light to we who are lost in darkness!"

The Earth Mother answered the prayer of her faithful disciple with another miracle. Blinding light filled the room once more, banishing the darkness of the cavern.

The goblins, however, were no fools. They were certainly not intellectuals, but when it came to cruelty and malice, they had no equals. And when this total lack of principles was joined to violence, the result was inevitable.

The staff the girl held up had shined. Now she was raising it again. That meant it would shine again.

One of the goblins, putting these most basic facts together, ducked his head. Unfortunately, he was one of the archers. As his three companions were murdered, he kept his head down, waiting for his chance, bow and arrow at the ready.

"Hh—Haagh!"

The shout seemed to be one of shock. Someone tumbled: it was High Elf Archer. The goblin's arrow had lanced between the two frontline guards to strike her. A critical hit indeed.

"What is this, now!" Lizard Priest exclaimed.

"Hrrgh..." A crude but sinister arrow stuck cruelly out of High Elf Archer's leg.

Goblin Slayer glanced back, then tossed his club before running over to the elf.

"ORAAG?!"

Woosh. The club spun once in the air and then connected firmly with a goblin's head, provoking a scream. It wasn't enough to kill the creature, though. As he ran, Goblin Slayer picked up a dagger from the ground, covering the final few steps in one great leap.

“GOAORR...?!”

The goblin grabbed his arrow and spun, trying to get away, but he was too late. The dagger plunged into his heart, twisted once, and it was over.

“Seventeen...”

That was all of them.

Looking around at the pile of corpses, Goblin Slayer picked up a nearby sword and put it in his scabbard.

“Hey—hey, you all right, Long-Ears?!”

“Hrr—r—yeah. I’m—I’m fine. I’m sorry. I failed.”

“I’ll tend to you right away,” Priestess said. “Is it poisoned?”

“Here,” Lizard Priest’s gravelly voice said. “First, we must remove the arrow.”

High Elf Archer’s face was pale, but she was trying to act brave; she kept her hands on the wound as she murmured, “Okay.”

Normally, Goblin Slayer might have gone straight over to his comrade. But this was still enemy territory. They needed to be alert for any possible ambush.

From what Goblin Slayer could see, the wound was not fatal—and anyway, there was something he wanted to check. He went over to the corpse of the last goblin archer he had killed and gave it a nonchalant kick.

“Hrm.”

The body rolled, exposing the shoulder. There, he saw a scar, from an arrow wound that had since healed. He remembered this goblin.

“...Wha?!”

“What’s wrong?”

At that moment, Goblin Slayer heard voices of surprise coming from behind him and turned around. He strode over to where High Elf Archer was cowering. Priestess looked up at him from beside her.

“G-Goblin Slayer, sir... Look at this.”

With a shaking hand stained with High Elf Archer’s blood,

she held up the shaft of an arrow. Yes—just the shaft, no arrowhead.

It had been carved from a branch, crudely enough to suggest a goblin's work; it even had some ugly little feathers stuck on the end. The head, however, had not been well secured. Or... Perhaps that had been done deliberately. Maybe the arrowhead was intended to break off and remain inside High Elf Archer's body.

He had been careless.

No—the contemplation, and the remorse, would have to wait.

Immediately, Goblin Slayer knelt by High Elf Archer's side.

"Does it hurt?"

"I-I-I'm just fine, r-really... Orcbolg, you w-worry too much..."

It looked like it hurt just to move. Blood was flowing from High Elf Archer's leg, and she was groaning.

"Keep pressure on the wound. It will help stem the blood. Although it isn't much."

"R-right, I'll... I'll do that." No doubt she was trying to sound strong, but her voice was much softer than usual.

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Goblin Slayer switched to asking Priestess questions.

“Any kind of poison?”

“For the moment, I don’t think so. But...” As she spoke, Priestess looked with concern at High Elf Archer’s injury. Even with the elf squeezing as hard as she could, blood was leaking out between her fingers. “With the arrowhead still lodged in there, there wouldn’t be any point in closing the wound up with a healing miracle...”

A cleric’s miracles might come from the gods, but their effects were limited by physical reality. Using Minor Heal while a foreign object remained in the body was a difficult situation.

Goblin Slayer glanced at Lizard Priest, but he shook his head, too.

“Refresh is capable only of enhancing the body’s native healing abilities.”

That made the conclusion simple. Dwarf Shaman reached into his pouch as he spoke. “Can’t just leave it there, can we? Beard-cutter, lend me a hand, will you?”

“Sure.” He and the dwarf looked at each other and quickly got to work. Priestess, who had some idea of what they were going to do, looked rather distraught; High Elf Archer, who didn’t, merely seemed uneasy.

Goblin Slayer drew a dagger—his own, not one he had stolen from a goblin—and checked the blade.

“I’ll do it. Give me fire.”

“Sure thing. *Dancing flame, salamander’s fame. Grant us a share of the very same.*” Dwarf Shaman removed a flint from among his catalysts, striking it as he spoke. A little ghost-flame sprung up in midair, shining on Goblin Slayer’s dagger.

Goblin Slayer heated the blade carefully and then snuffed the flame out with a quick motion. Almost at the same time, he pulled a cloth from his own bag and tossed it at High Elf Archer.

“Hold that in your mouth.”

"Wh-what are you planning?"
"I'm going to dig out the arrowhead."
High Elf Archer's long ears stood straight up.
"I—I don't want you to do that! After we get home, we can—!"

Still sitting on her behind, she scrambled backward. Dwarf Shaman let out a sigh.

"No whining, now, Long-Ears. Beard-cutter has the right of it. You want that leg to rot and fall off?"

From beside them, Lizard Priest spoke coolly and with the conviction of a rock falling from the sky. "There would certainly be no reattaching it then."

"Ooh... Ohhh..."

"Come on, everyone, you're scaring her." Priestess, unable to sit by any longer, scolded the men of the party—but she made no effort to stop what they were doing.

She herself had an arrow pulled out of her by force once. She knew the fear, and the pain—and just how much worse it could get if they left it alone.

"...At least, try to do it in the least painful way possible."

"What else would I do?" Goblin Slayer was waiting for the red-hot blade to cool to the right temperature. A traveling doctor had taught him that doing this would get rid of any poison on the blade.

"Show me the wound."

"Errgh... Ohh... You really won't make it hurt, will you...?" Very slowly, her face completely bloodless, High Elf Archer moved her hand.

Goblin Slayer didn't respond but inspected the injury, from which blood was still dripping.

"Wine."

"Right 'ere." Dwarf Shaman took a mouthful of fire wine and spat it out, as if he were casting Stupor. Tears leaped to High Elf Archer's eyes as the alcoholic spirits burned in the wound.

"Hrr...rrgh..."

"Bite down on the cloth. So you don't bite your tongue."

"Just... Just asking again, but... You won't make it hurt, will you...?"

"I can't promise anything," Goblin Slayer said with a shake of his head. "But I'll try."

High Elf Archer, appearing resigned, bit down on the cloth and squeezed her eyes shut. Priestess clasped her hand. And then Goblin Slayer plunged the dagger into the elf's thigh, widening the wound, digging deeper.

"Hrrrrrgh—Gah! Gagggghhh...!"

High Elf Archer's lithe body flopped like a fish that had washed up on the shore. Lizard Priest pressed down on her shoulders to hold her steady, and Priestess continued to hold her hand. Goblin Slayer didn't pause in his work; his hand was cruel but sure.

The removal of the arrowhead took only a matter of seconds, although High Elf Archer might have sworn that hours had passed.

"Done."

"Hooo...hooo..." She let out long breaths of relief.

Lizard Priest placed a scaled hand on High Elf Archer's thigh and recited, "*Gorgosaurus, beautiful though wounded, may I partake in the healing in your body!*" He was granted a gift: Refresh. The power of the fearsome nagas made the archer's wound better before their very eyes. Flesh joined itself, and skin built itself up, the wound seeming to boil away. A true miracle.

"Can you move?" he asked.

"Y-yeah," High Elf Archer said unsteadily, tears still at the edges of her eyes. She moved her leg back and forth, checking that it worked. Her ears drooped pitifully. "Human first aid is awfully violent. I can still feel it."

"A-are you okay?" Priestess asked, offering her shoulder to support High Elf Archer as she stood up.

"I think so..."

"Can you shoot your bow?" Goblin Slayer asked.

"Of course I can," the elf replied, perhaps a little more hotly than necessary.

She wasn't bragging, exactly. But even if she could still shoot, her mobility was impaired. At least for the remainder of the day.

"We ought to make a tactical retreat—" Goblin Slayer shook his head. "—but we can't do that yet."

"I am not confident in the number of our spells and miracles remaining," Lizard Priest announced calmly.

Even so, the helmet turned slowly from side to side. "There are still more of them deeper in. We have to investigate." Goblin Slayer checked his armor, helmet, shield, and weapon. Satisfied, he turned to his companions. "I can remain by myself if you prefer."

The wounded High Elf Archer was the first to respond. "Don't try to be funny. We're coming with you. Right?"

"Indeed! We certainly are," Priestess said with an energetic nod.

"Mm," Goblin Slayer grunted. Lizard Priest laughed and put a hand on his shoulder.

"I suppose that means all of us are going, then."

"Pfah! Long-Ears, never thinking of how tired the rest of us are," Dwarf Shaman said with a smile and an exaggerated shrug.

High Elf Archer fixed him with a glare. "Hey, Orcbolg's the one who wants to—"

And they were off and running.

Goblin Slayer, ignoring the customary ruckus of their argument, took another look around the living area. Although outmatched, the goblins had shown no sign of trying to run away.

So there was a goblin who had copied his little trick. One who had received first aid for his arrow wound. And one who commanded him.

"I don't like it," he muttered.

He didn't like it at all.

§

“Hmph.”

Goblin Slayer gave the rotted old door a kick, bringing it crashing down. At almost the same moment, the adventurers piled into the room, taking up positions, with Priestess in the center of their formation, holding a torch.

“Hrm...”

They had expected a warehouse or an armory or, perhaps, a toilet. But the room the light shone on was none of those.

Much like the living area from earlier, this was another large room dug out of the earth. There were several mounds of dirt that might have passed for chairs. Farther into the room was an oblong stone that might have been brought from elsewhere.

It was unmistakably an altar.

This was a chapel—so was this cave a temple? If so, this altar would be where they offered their sacrifices...

“Oh...!” Priestess was the first to notice, as was often the case. She rushed over. The memory of a trap they had encountered in the sewers flashed through her mind, but that was no reason to hesitate. She would be vigilant—but she would not refrain from helping.

A woman lay atop the cold stone as if she had been simply tossed there; she wore not a scrap of clothing. Her exposed body was dirty, and the way her eyelids were squeezed shut spoke to her exhaustion. Her matted hair was a gold the color of honey.

“She’s breathing...!” Priestess said happily, gently cradling the woman.

Her ample chest rose and fell gently: the proof of life.

“Quest accomplished, huh?” High Elf Archer muttered, obviously believing no such thing.

There was never any sense of satisfaction or closure in slaying goblins. She pursed her lips and looked around the chapel. It was a primitive place of worship. To a high elf like

her, it didn't seem like it would be possible to sense the presence of the gods in a place like this.

"...I wonder if a priest of the Evil Sect was here."

"Or perhaps these are vestiges of some ancient ruin," Lizard Priest said, looking around. The elf could hear him scraping away at the dust as he examined the place. "Though I cannot quite imagine what god could be worshiped in such a vulgar place..."

"Wait just a bloody moment," Dwarf Shaman said, running his finger along the wall. "This earth is fresh. This was dug out recently."

"Goblins?" Goblin Slayer asked.

"Probably," Dwarf Shaman nodded.

Were goblins fallen rheas? Or elves or dwarves? Or did they come from the green moon? No one knew. But as creatures that made their homes underground, they had estimable digging skills. No matter how remote the place, goblins could dig a hole and start living in it before anyone knew what was happening.

They could pop out and surprise a group of adventurers as easily as they could eat breakfast. One didn't have to be Goblin Slayer to know this. On her first adventure, Priestess had—

"Um... Look here...!"

At the distressed exclamation from Priestess, he looked once more at the captive adventurer. Priestess was holding up the woman's hair, not afraid to get her own hands dirty. She was pointing to the nape of the woman's neck.

High Elf Archer couldn't hold back a mutter of "That's awful," and it was hard to blame her. The unconscious woman's neck bore a brand, which stood out painfully. The ugly red-and-black impression besmirched her otherwise beautiful skin.

"Hrm..."

Goblin Slayer picked up the metal brand, which lay on the floor nearby. It looked like a stray horseshoe or some such

thing had been worked into a complicated shape.

"Is that what they used?" Lizard Priest asked.

"So it appears."

It seemed to be a sort of circle, in the middle of which was something that looked like an eye. Goblin Slayer took a torch and examined the brand carefully, fixing it in his memory. Was it the mark of a noble tribe or clan? There remained many mysteries about goblins.

"However... It doesn't appear to be a goblin totem."

Goblins had little notion of creating things themselves. They would simply steal what they needed; that was enough for them. This brand, though—even if it was constructed from a combination of found items—represented an act of creation.

"I think it's...the green moon," a shaking voice said. It was Priestess, gently stroking the woman's neck. "It's the sign of a god. The deity of external knowledge...the God of Wisdom."

—Many gods gathered around this board, to watch over it. They included, of course, the God of Knowledge, who ruled over the knowing of things and found many faithful among scholars and officials. The light of the God of Knowledge was said to shine among all who ventured into the unknown, seeking the truth and the ways of the world.

Yes: what the God of Knowledge granted was not knowledge itself but guideposts, a path leading to the truth. For adversity itself was an important kind of knowledge.

The God of Wisdom, who was the deity of the knowledge of things outside, dealt with something subtly different. The God of Wisdom did not lead supplicants to knowledge but gave wisdom to all who asked. What this would do to the world, the board, was probably of no interest to the deity.

Consider, for example, a young man who, confronted with the niggling unhappinesses of daily life, mutters, "Maybe the world will just end..." Normally, such words would be mere silliness, an innocent expression of dissatisfaction. But

when the eye of the God of Wisdom falls upon such a person —what then?

In an instant, some terrible way of ending the world enters the young man's mind, and he begins to take action. More than a few believe in this god, thanks to unaccountable bursts of insight. But...

"Geez. Now my head hurts almost as much as my leg," High Elf Archer said, frowning as if she indeed had a headache. "I'll keep watch. You guys go on."

"Hey," Dwarf Shaman said with a touch of annoyance. "It's all well and good you're keeping guard, but you can at least listen to what we're saying."

"Yeah, sure..." She didn't sound very enthusiastic. She thumbed the string of her bow, an arrow held loosely at the ready. She kept shifting her legs restlessly; perhaps the pain was bothering her. Her ears flicked a little as she listened carefully.

Goblin Slayer glanced in her direction but then looked once again at the brand.

"The green moon, you said?"

"Yes, sir. I learned just a little bit about it during my time at the Temple." Priestess didn't sound like she quite believed it herself. Her time as an apprentice seemed so far away already.

"You mean the one the goblins come from?" Goblin Slayer murmured, picking up the metal brand. "If so, then there's no doubt that our enemies are goblins."

He spoke without a hint of hesitation. "One of those goblins showed signs of having been healed."

But who would go so far as to use a miracle to help a goblin?

"An agent of chaos just overflowing with mercy and compassion?" Lizard Priest scoffed. "I doubt it."

"Then it must have been a goblin, right?" Priestess said. "But... How could they...?" She blinked, as if she didn't want to believe it.

The god who gave knowledge from outside was a mercurial one; it would not have been a great surprise if the deity had spoken to a goblin.

It *wouldn't* have been strange, yet a desperate doubt remained in Priestess's heart. Even so, if the goblins were able to complete a ritual... That would be far worse than occasionally hearing the voice of God.

"Are you sure it isn't some high-ranked evil priest, a dark elf or something?" she asked.

"What? I don't think so," a high, clear voice said in response to Priestess's suggestion.

Dwarf Shaman sighed again and stroked his beard with more than a little annoyance. "You can keep watch or you can chat. Pick one."

"You're the one who told me to listen to you guys. If I'm listening, I have the right to contribute, don't I?" High Elf Archer chuckled quietly.

"Mm," Lizard Priest said, nodding in agreement. "And mistress ranger. What would you like to contribute?"

"I mean—" She spun her pointer finger in a circle. "If you've got a bunch of goblins, and you only use them to do some looting... That doesn't make you much smarter than a goblin, does it?"

"Well hell, Long-Ears, maybe a bunch of bandits found religion and thought they were supposed to worship the goblins!"

"You're just upset that you can't believe in your own explanation anymore."

"Hrm, well."

"Heh." Lizard Priest gave a sort of snort, crossed his arms, and then began counting off on his fingers. "It thinks like a goblin, controls goblins, heals goblins, attacks people, and is a follower of evil."

Priestess put a finger to her lips, thinking through the possibilities. "A goblin priest? A warrior-priest?"

Nothing quite seemed to fit. What were they facing here?

A goblin of some kind? But what kind?

At that moment, an idea came into Priestess's head, as suddenly as if it was a gift from heaven.

It was an outrageous, impossible idea. But...

Things began to make sense if they were dealing with *someone who wielded an army against nonbelievers*.

"No... It can't be. That's impossible."

"..."

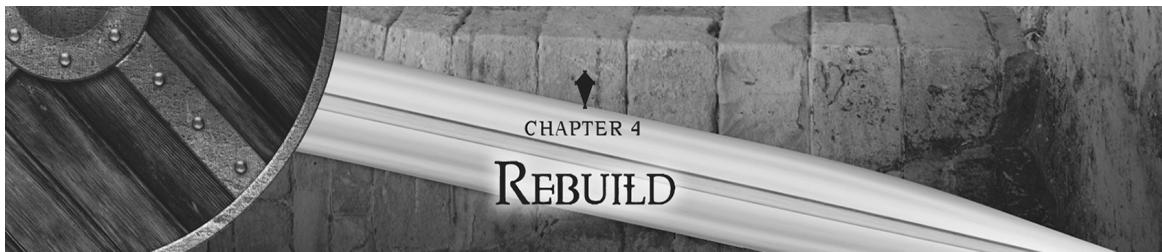
She hugged her own shoulders, shook her head, refusing to believe it.

Beside her, she could hear the brand creaking in Goblin Slayer's fist.

It wasn't possible. It was ridiculous. But in fact, nothing was impossible.

There was only one answer. Goblin Slayer acknowledged the truth of their enemy clearly.

"A goblin paladin..."



"That's their little *den* over there."

The cold was cutting, but it did nothing to dim the young woman's beauty. She looked like the daughter of nobility, like someone who would have been more at home in an elegant ballroom than under the gray skies of the northern mountains.

Her wavy, honey-colored hair was tied in two tails, and her facial features had a prideful cast. The size of her bust was obvious despite the chest armor she wore, her waist so narrow that she had no need for a corset.

The rapier that hung at her hip was of striking construction; the way it demanded admiration gave much the same impression as its master.

At the girl's neck hung a brand-new Porcelain-level tag, catching the sun that shined off the snow.

She was an adventurer, and she and her four companions had spent several days scrambling up the side of this snowy mountain. Now an ugly little hole lay open before them. One look at the disgusting mountain of waste beside the entrance made it clear that this was a nest.

And what did the nest belong to? With these newly minted heroes here to do battle, what else could it be?

Goblins.

Noble Fencer's heart lusted for battle at the very thought of them.

Now, here, she had no family and no riches, no power or authority. Only her own abilities and her friends would help her complete this quest. A true adventure.

For their first deed, they would get rid of the goblins attacking the village in the North. They would do it more quickly than anyone had ever seen.

“All right! Is everybody ready?” She put her slim hands to her hips in a proud gesture that emphasized her chest, then pointed at the nest with her sword. “Let’s starve those goblins out!”

That had been weeks ago.

It was good that they had stopped up the goblins’ tunnels by erecting defensive barriers around the exits. And they hadn’t been wrong to set up a tent, build a fire for warmth, and prepare an ambush.

“The goblins are attacking the village because they’re low on supplies,” Noble Fencer had said, full of confidence. “They’re foolish little creatures. A few days without food, and they’ll have no choice but to make a run for it.”

And indeed, that was what happened. They fell on one group of goblins trying to break through the defensive barriers and killed them. Some days later, a group of starving monsters emerged, and they, too, were slaughtered. It was safe to say that everything was going as planned. They would complete the quest with hardly any danger and a minimum of effort.

But that was as much a dream as the idea that these untested new adventurers might suddenly become Platinum-ranked. If it were as easy as they imagined, goblin slaying could hardly be called an adventure.

This was the north country, a frozen place—there was even an ice cap nearby—beyond the territory of those who had words. A person’s breath could turn to ice as soon as it left their mouth, burning the skin, and frozen eyebrows made noise each time one blinked. Equipment became heavy with the chill, stamina draining away day by day with next to no relief.

There were two other women in the five-person party including Noble Fencer, though the men of course kept their

distance. They ate to try to distract themselves and keep up their strength. It was all they could do.

But the load was heavy, since it included their equipment, the barriers, and the cold-weather gear. Individually, each of them carried only a handful of provisions. One of their members knew the ways of a trapper, but there was no guarantee it would be possible to obtain food for five people.

Arrows, too, were limited. They could try to retrieve the ones they had used, but...

First and foremost, though, they ran out of water.

Their group made the mistake of eating the ice and snow, giving themselves diarrhea and further taxing their endurance.

They weren't stupid; they knew they had to melt the stuff over a fire, even if it was troublesome.

Meaning, of course, that next they ran out of fuel.

They had scant food, no water, and no way to keep warm. It spelled the ignominious end of Noble Fencer's seemingly foolproof battle plan.

Yet, it would be ridiculous to give up by this point. They were only dealing with goblins—the weakest of monsters. Perfectly suited to beginners, to a first adventure. To run back home without even having fought the creatures would be humiliating. They would forever be branded the adventurers who had fled from goblins...

That being the case, someone had to go down the mountain, get supplies in town, and return.

The adventurers looked at one another, huddled under their cramped tent, and all focused on one thing. Specifically, Noble Fencer, who was shaking from the cold, using her silver sword like a staff to support herself, yet levelly returning everyone's gaze.

Nobody wants to blame themselves when things go wrong.

"You go," their rhea scout said, sharply enough to pierce a

heart. Even though he had been the first to agree when she had suggested the starvation tactics, saying he thought it sounded interesting. "Right now, I'm the only one doing any work around here. *Go get that! Catch us some dinner!*" *I just can't stand it*, he muttered.

"...He's right," their wizard said, nodding somberly from underneath a heavy cloak. "You know what? I was against this idea from the start. I haven't even had a chance to use my spells."

"Yeah, I agree." It was the half-elf warrior next, stifling a yawn as she spoke. "I'm getting pretty tired of this."

If Noble Fencer recalled correctly, neither of them had thought starving the goblins out was an excellent idea at first. When she explained that this would be the safest method, however, they had both come around.

What was more, Noble Fencer thought that she and Half-Elf Warrior had grown closer over the past several days of marching. She turned her gaze on the warrior, feeling betrayed, and gave a dismissive little sniff.

"But then there'd be no point to all our suffering," the half-elf added. "And what do you think, Pint-sized?"

"Eh, I don't much mind whoever goes." The dwarf monk played with a symbol of the God of Knowledge, apparently trying to answer in as few words as possible. "But dwarves and rheas have such short legs. And half-elves are so slight. I think a human is our best bet here." He looked at Noble Fencer with a sly glint in his eyes, which were almost lost in his black facial hair.

Warriors were more suited to going it alone than spell casters. He might as well have asked her to go outright.

"...Very well. I'll do it," Noble Fencer, who had listened in silence until that moment, replied curtly. "It's obviously the most logical choice."

Yes, that was it. She would go because it was logical. Not because her plan had failed. Or so she repeated to herself as she worked her way down the long mountain road.

Leaning on her heirloom sword as a staff, she removed her breastplate and stashed it on her back, no longer able to endure the weight and the cold. She bit her lip, embarrassed that her adventurer's equipment had winded up as nothing more than more luggage.

On top of that was the welcome waiting for her back at the village.

"Ah! Master adventurer, you've returned! You've had success?"

"Well, uh..."

"Were any among your number injured?"

"Not yet... I mean, we haven't...fought them yet..."

"Gracious..."

"But I wondered...could you...could you share a bit of food with us, please?"

The answer was no.

One could imagine how the headman and the villagers felt. The adventurers they had summoned via the quest network had been away for weeks and yet had accomplished nothing! And now they wanted more food, more fuel, more water. If the village had the spare resources to supply five heavily armored young people, would they have needed to call for adventurers in the first place? They barely had enough for the winter themselves. Trying to support an adventuring party on top of that would be too much.

It could only be called a stroke of good luck that Noble Fencer was able to wheedle a few trifles out of them.

"..."

The cruel irony was that these additional supplies only made her return journey that much slower and more difficult. With every step she took through the snow, regret filled her heart like the ice that sloshed in her boots.

Should they have made more preparations beforehand? Invited more adventurers to be part of their party? Or maybe they should have made a tactical retreat instead of pushing ahead with the starvation idea...?

"No! Absolutely not! No one is running from goblins!"

She let her emotions do the talking, but there was no one to talk back.

By now she was enclosed in night, a night that further blackened the "white darkness" of the whipping snow. She had already been exhausted when she began this march with her heavy load, and everything about it was a cruelty to her.

"We won't give in...to goblins..."

She breathed on her numb hands, trying desperately to set up her tent. Just having something, anything, between her and the snow and the wind would make such a difference...

"It's cold... So cold..."

The icy night air was merciless. Hugging herself and trembling, Noble Fencer fumbled with some firewood.

"*Tonitrus*," she murmured, incanting the Lightning spell. Small bolts of electricity crackled from her fingertips and set the logs alight.

Noble Fencer was a rare frontline fighter who could use lightning magic, which she had learned because it was a family tradition. And what would be the harm of a little lightning here? She could use it once or twice each day; it made sense to put it to work starting a fire so she could get some warmth. But even that was a luxury, for it used up some of the meager firewood the villagers had given her.

"....."

She spoke no further but hugged her knees, trying to curl into a ball to help her escape from the sound of the howling wind and snow.

Until a few days ago, she had had friends.

Now, she was all alone.

Her companions were a few hours' climb away. They were waiting for her. Probably.

But Noble Fencer simply didn't have the strength to reach them.

I'm so tired...

That was everything, all she could think.

She loosened her belt and the straps of her armor. It was something she had once heard you should do. The warmth of the fire began to seep into her body, and her spirit eased.

She had imagined dispatching the goblins readily, easily. In the blink of an eye, she would have risen to Gold or even Platinum. She would make her own name, not rely on her parents' power. But how difficult that was turning out to be!

I guess...maybe I should have expected it.

Things like fame and fortune did not come to a person overnight. They accumulated over decades, centuries. Had she believed that she, alone and unaided, would be able to put forth all at once an effort worthy of such accomplishments?

I'd better apologize.

Did she mean to her friends or to her family? She wasn't sure, but the humility she felt in her heart was real as Noble Fencer closed her eyes.

She began to drift off, consciousness growing farther away. With such fatigue in her bones, how could she want anything more than rest?

That was why she didn't realize immediately what she was hearing.

Splat. The sound of something moist slapping down.

Somehow the edge of the tent had come up—had the wind caught it?—and something had landed next to the fire.

Noble Fencer sat up from where she had lain down and looked at the thing sleepily, questioningly. “I wonder what... this is...”

It was an ear.

Not a human one, but the ear of a half-elf, cruelly severed halfway down.

“Ee—eeyikes!”

Noble Fencer fell backward, landing on her behind. Still shouting, she scrambled back.

At that moment, there came a horrible laughter; it seemed to surround the tent.

It was the moment after that that something from outside grabbed the tent and pulled it down.

“Ahh—oh! No! What’s this?! Why are you—?!”

Noble Fencer writhed under the fallen tent, half-mad. The bonfire spread to the tent, sending up copious amounts of smoke, causing her eyes to water and inducing a coughing fit.

When the fighter at last worked her way out from her entrapment, she was hardly recognizable as what she had once been. Her neat golden hair was in disarray, her eyes and nose messy with tears and snot, and there was ash on her face.

“Ee-eek! G-goblins...?!”

She shouted and recoiled at the sight of the dirty little creatures, backing away from the sound of their hideous laughter. Noble Fencer was completely surrounded by goblins in the dark, snow-whipped night. They had crude clubs and stone weapons and wore little more than pelts.

Yet, it was not the appearance of the goblins that so terrified Noble Fencer. It was what they held in their hands: the familiar heads of a rhea, a dwarf, and a human.

Farther away, the half-elf was being dragged limply by the hair through the snow. She left a red streak behind her like a brush across a canvas.

“Oh... Please...”

No, no. Noble Fencer shook her head like a spoiled child, the movement sending waves through her hair.

Had they waited until she was away to attack?

Had the others decided to assault the cavern while Noble Fencer wasn’t there, leading to this grisly end?

Noble Fencer reached for her sword with a hand that wouldn’t stop shaking, tried to draw it from its scabbard—

“Wh-why? Why can’t I g-get it out...?!”

She had committed a crucial error. What had she thought

would happen? Her sword had been soaked by snow, then she had left it by the fireside—and now it was exposed to the cold again. The snow had melted onto the hilt and scabbard. What else would it do in this situation but freeze once more?

Dozens of goblins closed in on every side of the weeping fighter. The girl, however, pulled her lips tight. Maybe she couldn't draw her sword, but she began to weave a spell, her tongue heavy with the cold.

“*Tonitrus...oriens...!*”

“GRORRA!!”

“Hrr—ghh?!”

Of course, the goblins were not kind enough to let her finish. She was hit in the head by a ruthless blow from a stone; it brought Noble Fencer to her knees.

Goblin “sympathy” served only one purpose: to mock their pathetic, weeping, terrified prey.

Her shapely nose had been squashed, the dripping blood dyeing the snowy field.

“GROOOOUR!!”

“N-no! Stop—stop it, please! Ah! H-hrggh! No, please—!”

She cried as they grabbed her hair, screamed as they took her sword.

The last thing she saw was her own feet flailing in the air. Noble Fencer was buried by more goblins than she could count on two hands.

So who was it who had been starved out here? Was this what they got for challenging the goblins on their home turf? Or for failing to prepare well enough to see out their own strategy?

Whatever the case, we surely need not dwell on what befell her next.

That was the end of those adventurers.

Noble Fencer's eyes opened to the crackling sound of flying sparks. She felt a faint warmth, but the ache in her neck—a burning sensation—let her know that this was reality.

What had happened? What had been done to her? A series of memories flashed through her mind.

“...”

Noble Fencer silently pushed the blanket aside and sat up. She appeared to be in a bed.

When she looked around, she saw she was in a log building. A smell prickled her nose—wine? It had been one more bit of bad luck that even being stuffed in a pile of waste hadn't dampened her sense of smell.

She was on the second floor of an inn. In one of the guest rooms, she thought. If she wasn't simply hallucinating.

At the same time, she could see a human figure crouching in one dark corner of the room, which was illuminated only by the fire.

The figure wore a cheap-looking helmet and grimy armor. The sword he carried was a strange length, and a small circular shield was propped up against the wall. He looked singularly unimpressive—except for the silver tag around his neck.

Noble Fencer's voice was done shaking. “Goblins,” she said. She spoke in a whisper, more to herself than to anyone else.

“Yes.” The man responded just the same, his voice quiet and his words blunt. “Goblins.”

“...I see,” she said, and then lay back down in bed. She closed her eyes, looking into the darkness on the backs of her eyelids, and then she opened them ever so slightly. “What about the others?” she asked after a second.

“All dead,” came the dispassionate reply. It was almost merciful in its cold directness, giving her only the facts.

“I... I see.”

Noble Fencer thought for a moment. She marveled at how hardly a ripple passed through her heart. She had expected

to cry, but her spirit was strikingly quiet.

"Thank you for helping me." A pause. "What I mean is...is it over?"

"No." The floorboards creaked as the man stood up. He fastened the shield to his left arm, checked the condition of his helmet, then approached her with a bold, nonchalant stride. "There are some things I'd like to ask you."

"..."

"Just tell me what you can."

"..."

"You don't mind?"

"..."

Perhaps taking Noble Fencer's silence for agreement, the strange man continued detachedly: How many goblins had she encountered? What was the layout of the nest? What types of goblins were there? Where had she encountered them? What direction?

She answered without emotion.

I don't know. I don't know. They all looked the same. Near the cave. The north.

The man only grunted, "Hmm," adding nothing further.

Snap. Crackle. The moments of intermittent speech were connected by the muttering of the fire in the hearth.

The man rose and took a poker in his hand, jabbing it listlessly into the fire. Finally, he spoke, still facing the hearth and just as quietly as before.

"What did you do?"

"...Tried to starve them out," Noble Fencer said, something tugging at the edges of her mouth. It was only a slight gesture, so small that no one but she might have noticed it. But she thought she had smiled. "I was sure it would work."

"I see." She nodded at this dispassionate reply.

Block off the exits to the cave, wait until the goblins started to starve, then finish them off. She and her friends could do it together, nice and clean. Get some experience,

raise their ranks. And then... And then...

"I was so sure..."

"I see," he repeated and nodded. He stirred the fire again and then put aside the poker. There was a rattling of iron as he stood. The floor creaked. "Yes, I understand how that could happen."

Noble Fencer looked up at him vacantly. The helmet prevented her from seeing his face. It occurred to her that these were the first comforting words he had said to her.

Perhaps the man had already lost interest in Noble Fencer, because he strode for the doorway. Before he got there, she called out to him.

"Hey, wait!"

"What?"

Something was coming to her, a dim and ambiguous image from somewhere on the far side of memory.

That grimy armor. That cheap helmet. That strange sword and round shield. Someone stubborn and strange, with a Silver status tag around his neck. Someone who killed goblins. All just a dim memory.

But it reminded her of certain lines from a song she had heard somewhere. It brought back memories of long, long ago, when she and her friends were laughing together in town.

An adventurer known as the kindest man on the frontier.

"Are you...Goblin Slayer?"

"....."

He didn't respond immediately; there was a moment of silence.

Then, without turning around, he said, "Yes. Some call me that."

His voice, as ever, gave no hint of his emotions, and with that, he left the room.

There was the sound of the door closing. The poker on the ground was the only sign he had been there.

Noble Fencer stared up at the ceiling. Someone had

cleaned her skin and clothes, and exchanged them for a rough, unadorned outfit. She put a hand to her chest, which rose and fell in time with her breath. Was it that man who had wiped her body clean? Or not? Truthfully, she didn't care either way.

There was nothing left for her now. Nothing at all.

She had abandoned her home, her friends were gone, and her chastity had been stolen. She had no money, no equipment.

That's not true.

She spotted something in a corner of the room, the corner where the man—Goblin Slayer—had first been sitting. Leather armor, battered and gouged, and her item pouch, now dirty.

The ache in her neck flared up.

"Goblin Slayer... One who kills goblins."

It seemed the goblins hadn't noticed that Noble Fencer had a false bottom sewn into her item pouch.

Traditionally, when using a rapier, one carries an object in the opposing hand that aids in defense.

What she had hidden in the very bottom of her item pouch was a second jeweled blade from her family home. It was an aluminum dagger forged by a lightning-hammer against a red gem.

§

"How is she?"

"Awake."

As Goblin Slayer came down the stairs, Priestess questioned him with worry in her voice, but he responded nonchalantly.

Unlike during their earlier discussion, there were no villagers at the inn now.

Night had well and truly fallen by the time Goblin Slayer and the others came back. If the goblins were all dead, then

there was no need for the villagers to spend the night in fearful vigilance. Their days of being tormented by the dark and the cold and the fear were over.

The only exception was the village chief. He had the misfortune of welcoming the adventurers and was the first to hear their report.

“The goblins appear to have built a separate nest.”

The headman could hardly be blamed for the way his jaw fell open. How was his village, here in the North, supposed to prepare for winter now? They had so little to spare. And now it had come to this. The goblins in the cave had been slain; the adventurers would be within their rights to consider the quest concluded. The villagers would have to go back to the Guild, file another quest, and pay another reward.

If they didn’t, the village would simply be destroyed.

Therefore, his relief was immense when Goblin Slayer announced that his party would continue to work on the goblins. But it didn’t resolve the village’s problem with provisions. The table the party sat around had only modest fare, mostly salted vegetables.

In a free space among the plates, a sheet of lambskin paper lay open. It was the map of the snowy mountain the trapper had given them prior to their attack on the cave. Goblin Slayer had the map arranged so that north was up from where he sat.

“Hey,” High Elf Archer said from under half-closed eyes. “Should we really be leaving her alone?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know?”

“How could I know?” Goblin Slayer said, sounding a bit annoyed. He could be curt, and abrupt, and cold. But he almost never shouted. “What should I have said to her? ‘I’m sorry your friends are dead, but at least you survived’?”

This took the wind out of High Elf Archer’s sails. “Well... Well...” She opened her mouth, then closed it again, before finally saying, “There’s such a thing as the sensitive way to

say things."

Goblin Slayer's reply was brief: "It doesn't change what they mean."

Come to think of it...

Priestess bit her lip gently. He had not tried to comfort her in her own case, either. Nor when they had rescued the injured elf adventurer from the ruins. He was always just...

The faint taste of blood was so bitter it almost brought tears to her eyes.

She glanced in Goblin Slayer's direction, but he didn't appear to notice.

"How is your injury? Does it affect your movement at all?"

High Elf Archer pursed her lips. Such bald changes of subject were a specialty of his. Then again, he was worried about her (even if his concern was mostly about slaying goblins!), and she couldn't complain about that.

"...It's fine. Even if it still hurts a little. I've gotten treatment for it."

"I see." A nod. His helmet rattled with the motion. "In that case, moving on to the provisioning of equipment. How are things going?"

"Mm." Lizard Priest nodded somberly and patted the hempen bag sitting beside him. His chair, around which he had somehow managed to wrap his entire tail, creaked. "I have managed to obtain provisions—although they came rather dear, as I had to ask the villagers to draw from their own stockpiles."

"There go our profits...again," High Elf Archer said with a sigh. She was trying to sound frustrated, but a smile tugged at the corners of her lips. They had been together for close to a year now, and she had grown used to this. Although her resolve to take him on a real adventure had only strengthened as well.

"What's this, then? Worried about money, Long-Ears? You're not usually the type." Dwarf Shaman laughed uproariously, whether or not he understood what High Elf

Archer was really thinking. Not content with just the wine he used as a catalyst, he had gotten another cup to see him through this conversation. It was a tasteless, odorless, and strong spirit; the bottle had been buried in the snow and made into mead. Dwarf Shaman gulped it down.

High Elf Archer thought she would get a hangover just watching him. "Of course I am," she said, glaring at the dwarf. "The rewards for killing goblins are measly!"

"Then again, we did manage to rescue an adventurer this time around," Lizard Priest said.

"Well, it's not every day you see five or six Silver-ranked adventurers out slaying goblins, is it?" Dwarf Shaman said.

"Er... I'm only Obsidian," Priestess murmured, and smiled ambiguously.

She knew what it was like to be the only survivor of an annihilated party. She wanted to believe that she wasn't forcing the interpretation—but she couldn't help wondering how different she really was from that Noble Fencer.

She didn't know if it was fate or chance... But each time she thought of the invisible dice rolled by the gods, she felt something like dregs accumulate in her heart.

"Say, I managed to get us some medicine," Dwarf Shaman said. He drained his cup, poured, then drank again.

"That girl's older sister..." Goblin Slayer paused for a second. "The medicine woman. We were told she's inexperienced."

"Maybe she can't make us potions, but she said she would give us all the herbs we wanted," Dwarf Shaman said with a broad grin. Then he stroked his beard. "Don't you think she's just the type for you? She'd make a nice little wife."

"I have no idea."

"Um....," Priestess burst out, unable to contain herself.

Dwarf Shaman and Goblin Slayer, their conversation interrupted, looked at her, and Lizard Priest and High Elf Archer shortly followed.

"Um, well...." She squirmed under their collective gaze. "I

just...wonder what we're going to do next," she ended lamely.

"Kill the goblins, of course." Goblin Slayer's answer was as cold as ever. He leaned over the table, eyeing the cups and plates that hemmed in his map. "Move the dishes."

"You got it," Dwarf Shaman said as if suddenly coming to himself; he grabbed a steamed potato off one of the plates and took a bite.

"Hey!" said High Elf Archer, who'd thought she had dibs on that food. She cleared the plates away looking very ill-used.

Worried that his liquor might be collected along with the rest of the dishes, Dwarf Shaman pulled his cup and bottle toward himself protectively.

Lizard Priest judged the sight of both of them to be "most amusing," sticking out his tongue and pouring more wine into his empty cup.

"....."

When all was done, Priestess silently wiped the table down.

"Good," Goblin Slayer said, nodding and rearranging the map on the tabletop. Then he took a writing utensil—just a piece of charcoal attached to a piece of wood—from his item pouch and marked the location of the cave with an X.

"It's obvious that cave was not their living quarters."

"Yeah, it was definitely a chapel or something," High Elf Archer said, sipping a bit of grape wine. "Although I still can't quite believe it."

"Believable or not, fact it appears to be. I think we must recognize as much. Still..." Lizard Priest gave a hissing sigh, closing his eyes. A second later, he opened one of them and looked at Priestess. She met his eyes and trembled. "...I wonder what our honored cleric thinks."

"Oh! Uh... Um, yes..." Priestess quickly straightened up in her chair, gripping her sounding staff, which lay across her knees. It was clear that he was trying to show some

consideration for her.

I have to respond.

She took a loud gulp of wine, licked her now-moist lips. “I agree with Goblin Slayer. It was...thirty?”

“Thirty-six,” Goblin Slayer put in. “That’s how many of them we slew.”

“I don’t think thirty-six of them could possibly all sleep there.”

“True, the place didn’t seem to have much in the way of food or wine or any of their other favorite things,” Dwarf Shaman said.

The word *goblin* was practically synonymous with the word *stupid*, but that didn’t mean they had no brains at all. The reason they had no technology for creating anything was because they tended to consider looting enough to meet their needs. But the same could not be said of the caves they lived in. If they had stolen a house, or some ruins, some preexisting structure, that might have been a different matter. But a cave...

Goblins, in their own nasty way, would prepare storehouses, sleeping places, and trash heaps. At the very least, one would have expected to find the scraps of one of their great feasts lying around, but the adventurers had discovered no such remains. They had found only that stone altar, a place that seemed like a chapel, and a woman about to be offered up...

“This suggests that their main habitation is elsewhere,” Goblin Slayer said, circling on the map a hilltop beyond the mountains. “According to the locals, there are some old ruins at some point higher than where we climbed.”

“Chances are very strong that the goblins are based there.” Lizard Priest nodded. “Do you have any sense what kind of ruins they are?”

“A dwarven fortress.”

“Hmm,” Dwarf Shaman murmured at this mention of his race; he took another mouthful of mead. “One of my

people's fortresses from the Age of the Gods, is it? That means a frontal assault would risk life and limb, Beardcutter. Shall we try fire?"

"I have a small amount of gasoline," Goblin Slayer said, withdrawing a bottle filled with black liquid from his bag. "But I presume the fortress is made of stone. A fire attack from the outside would not set it alight."

"From the outside..." Priestess repeated, tapping a finger against her lip. "What about from the inside, then?"

"A fine plan," Lizard Priest said immediately, opening his jaws and nodding. He ran a claw along the sheepskin map, tracing their marching route carefully. "Castles infiltrated by the enemy are and have always been vulnerable."

"But how are we going to get inside? I'm sure we can't just walk in the front door," Priestess said with a sound of distress.

At that, though, High Elf Archer's ears stood straight up, and she leaned well forward. "So you want to sneak into a fortress!" She looked positively giddy. She kept murmuring, "*Right, right,*" to herself, her ears bouncing in time to her contemplations. "Right! This is almost starting to feel like a real adventure. Great!"

"Th-this is...an adventure?"

"Sure is," High Elf Archer said in her bright, cheerful way. She was naturally upbeat, although it was possible she was putting on an encouraging front. Nothing said you had to act depressed just because you were in a depressing situation.

"Ancient mountains deep in the wilderness! A towering fortress controlled by some powerful ringleader! And we sneak in and take him out!"

If that isn't adventure, what is it?

High Elf Archer offered this explanation with much waving and gesturing, then looked pointedly at Goblin Slayer.

"I guess we're not exactly fighting a Demon Lord or anything...but it's not classic goblin slaying for sure."

"It's not quite infiltration, either," Goblin Slayer muttered.

"The enemy will know there are adventurers around. We must approach cautiously."

"You have a plan?" Dwarf Shaman asked.

"I just thought of one." Goblin Slayer looked at them. His expression was masked by his helmet, but he seemed to be looking at his two clerics.

"Are disguises against your religion?"

"Hmmm. I wonder," Lizard Priest said, his eyes rolling in his head. Then his reptilian eyes fixed on Priestess and glinted mischievously. She took his meaning and smiled gently herself.

I can't just let everyone baby me all the time.

"I—I think it depends on the time and the situation."

"All right." Goblin Slayer fished in his item pouch and, at length, pulled something out. It rolled across the table, over the map, and then toppled.

It was the brand bearing the sign of the evil eye.

"Since they were so kind as to leave us a clue, I could hardly refuse to pursue it."

"Ha-ha. Very clever," Lizard Priest said with a clap of his scaled hands. He seemed to understand what was going on.
"Become a member of the Evil Sect. Mm, very well."

"Yes."

"I am a lizardman who serves the Dark God. My disciple is a warrior, and we are accompanied by a dwarven mercenary..."

"I guess that makes me a dark elf!" High Elf Archer said with a catlike grin. Then she turned to Priestess. "I'll have to color my body with ink. Hey, maybe you could put on some false ears! We could be twins!"

"Huh? Oh—huh? Will I—will I have to color myself, too?"

Suddenly Priestess didn't know where to look. High Elf Archer zipped around her, all smiles.

"It's better than goblin gore, right?"

"I don't think that's saying much...!"

Given the freedom to choose, she wouldn't have picked

either of those things. But if it came down to it...

Goblin Slayer glanced at the two chattering girls, then turned back to the other men. Lizard Priest narrowed his eyes ever so slightly.

"They are two fine young women."

"Yes," Goblin Slayer said with a nod, "I know."

If he had to do something outrageous or unbelievable to achieve victory, he would. If he had to become depressed or serious in order to fight effectively, he would do it.

But the reality was different. Laughter and cheer: the whole party recognized how important those things were.

"Now then, I suppose we must decide what we will do in the manner of disguise," Lizard Priest said.

"It would be inconvenient for the goblins to discover we were adventurers," Goblin Slayer said. "Whatever else we do, we must change what we're wearing."

"Pfah," Dwarf Shaman said with a cackle, his breath stinking of alcohol. "If you don't mind 'em well used, I've got a few outfits."

"Oh-ho. You are a dwarf of many talents, master spell caster."

"Good food and wine, good music and song, and something beautiful to wear. If you've got all that plus the company of a fine woman, you've got everything you need to enjoy life." He settled back with another cup of the mead in hand and closed his eyes. "I can handle cooking, music, song, and sewing on my own. As for a woman, there's always the courtesans in town."

"Goodness. You've no wife, then?" Lizard Priest looked rather surprised, but Dwarf Shaman answered, "Indeed I don't. I thought I'd spend another hundred years or so enjoying bachelorhood, playing the bon viveur."

Lizard Priest chuckled, sticking his tongue out and sipping happily at his drink. "Master spell caster, how very young you seem. It's enough to make an old lizard jealous."

"Ah, but I do believe I'm older than you." He held out the

wine jar invitingly; Lizard Priest nodded and held up his cup.

Goblin Slayer was next. He grunted, "Mm," and simply held up his cup. Alcohol sloshed into it.

"You all just make sure to enjoy your lives," the shaman said, adding, "*Be it with goblins or gods or what have you.*" Then he settled back to appreciate his wine.

His gaze settled on the two chattering young women.

"Laugh, cry, rage, enjoy—the long-eared girl is good at those, isn't she?"

"..."

Goblin Slayer looked into his cup, saying nothing. A cheap-looking helmet stared back at him from the wine, tinged with the orangish color of the lamps. He raised the cup to that helmet and drained it in one gulp. His throat and stomach felt like they were burning.

He let out a breath. Just like he did when he was on a long path, looking behind, looking ahead, and continuing on.

"It is never so simple," he said.

"No, I don't suppose it is," the dwarf responded.

"Is it not?" asked Lizard Priest. "I guess you're right."

The three men laughed without making a sound.

It was only then that the girls noticed them, looking at them with puzzlement.

"What's up?" asked High Elf Archer.

"Is something wrong?" said Priestess.

Dwarf Shaman waved away their questions, and after giving things a moment to settle down, Goblin Slayer said:

"Now. About the goblins."

"Ah-ha! So we come to it, Beard-cutter." Dwarf Shaman shook the droplets off his beard and shifted in his seat. "I s'pose this paladin-like fellow is their leader. That's if he really exists, of course."

"Yes." Goblin Slayer nodded. "I've never fought such a goblin, either."

"The question is, just how smart is he?"

"He was able to imitate my devices, at least." Goblin

Slayer took the arrowhead out of his bag, rolling it around in his hand. It was stained with High Elf Archer's blood. It gave him a dark feeling. "And if we can destroy thirty-six of them in one expedition, it means our foe is many."

"So, mean little brains and lots of 'em? Sounds like another day's work with goblins," Dwarf Shaman said.

Things at the harvest festival had somehow gone in their favor, but that was because they knew the terrain and had made preparations. Even if there were no more enemies than there had been at the farm, the adventurers numbered only five. Fighting in hostile territory seemed rather unmanageable.

Lizard Priest, who had been listening quietly, made a rumble in his throat, then said seriously, "And there is one more problem." He struck the floor with his tail, stretched out his arms, and tapped the claw on the newer mark Goblin Slayer had made on the map. "Specifically, if we should be so fortunate as to get into the enemy's fortifications, what do we do from there?"

"Ah, about that," Goblin Slayer said. "If we do manage to get in—"

Criiiick.

No sooner had he spoken than there was a sound of creaking wood. Immediately, the adventurers all reached for their weapons.

They held their collective breath. The innkeeper had retired much earlier.

Slowly, the creaking became quiet footsteps. Someone came down the stairs, then exhaled.

"Goblins...?"

The voice was strained, almost like a sigh. It came from Noble Fencer, who stood clutching the railing of the staircase, swaying unsteadily. She wore tattered armor over her light bedclothes, and in her hand a silver dagger glittered in the light.

Mithril...? No, the color's too light. A magical item of some

sort, perhaps...?

Dwarf Shaman found himself squinting at the gleam. To think that it should be something that he, a friend of metal, had never seen.

“.....Then... I’m coming, too.”

“No way!” High Elf Archer was the first to respond. “We came to *rescue* you because of the quest your parents posted.” She looked into Noble Fencer’s eyes with characteristic elven directness. Those eyes were deep and dark, like the bottom of a well—or so they seemed to her.

The mention of her parents didn’t seem to stir so much as a ripple in Noble Fencer.

There was an intake of breath, ever so slight.

“Before you put your life in danger again, don’t you think you should at least go home and talk to them?” High Elf Archer said.

“.....No. I can’t do that.” Noble Fencer shook her head, her honey-colored hair shaking. “.....I have to get it back.”

Lizard Priest put his hands together in a strange shape, resting his chin atop them. With his eyes closed, he appeared half as if in prayer, half as if enduring some pain. Quietly, he asked:

“And what might *it* be?”

“Everything,” Noble Fencer answered firmly. “Everything I’ve lost.”

Dreams. Hopes. Futures. Chastity. Friends. Comrades. Equipment. A sword.

All that the goblins stole from her and took away into the depths of their gloomy hole.

“I cannot say I do not understand,” Lizard Priest said after a moment, his breath hissing. Noble Fencer was talking about pride, about a way of life. Lizard Priest brought his palms together in a strange gesture. “A naga has his pride precisely because he is a naga. If he has no pride, he is no longer a naga.”

“Ju-just a second...!” High Elf Archer said. Lizard Priest

was so calm and collected—although, come to think of it, he did seem to like combat. The elf's ears had drooped with pity, but now they sprang back up. "Dwarf! Say something!"

"Why shouldn't we let her do as she wishes?" the shaman said.

"Guh?!"

Yet another un-elf-like sound (she seemed to have an ever-increasing repertoire) came from High Elf Archer's throat.

Dwarf Shaman paid her no mind but, shaking the last drop out of the bottle of mead, said, "Our quest was to rescue her. It's up to her what she does after that."

"*Et tu, dwarf?!* What if she dies, huh?! What then?"

"You might die, yourself. Or me. Or any of us." He drained that final cup and wiped his mouth. "Every living thing dies one day. You elves should know that better than anybody."

"Well... Well yeah, but..."

Droop went the ears again. High Elf Archer looked around with an expression like a lost child who didn't know what to do next.

Priestess met her eyes, and it almost prevented the girl from saying what she said next. She looked at the ground, bit her lip, quietly drank the last of the wine in her cup. If she hadn't, Priestess didn't think she could have gotten the words out. "Let's... Let's take her along."

If she didn't say them, no one else would.

"If... If we don't..."

She can't be saved.

Without a doubt, there will be no salvation for her.

Priestess herself had been that way, once.

And—she suspected—so had *he*.

"I...", he—Goblin Slayer—began, picking his words very carefully, "...am not your parents, nor am I a friend."

Noble Fencer said nothing.

"You know what should be done when you have a quest in mind."

"I do."

"Hey!"

But almost before High Elf Archer had gotten the word out of her mouth, there was an unpleasant tearing sound.

The golden hair went flying through the air.

".....Your reward. I'm paying in advance."

She took a lock of the hair she had just cut off. She cut another lock with her dagger—another tearing sound—and set it on the table. The two tails of her hair, once tied with ribbon, were now cruelly lost.

".....I'm going, too."

Her hair was brutally short now, her lips drawn back in determination—the very image of someone bent on vengeance.

Priestess heard a soft grunt from inside Goblin Slayer's helmet.

"Goblin Slayer...sir...?"

"What can you do?"

He ignored Priestess's look, instead flinging this question at Noble Fencer.

Without hesitation, the girl responded, "I can use the sword. And a spell. Lightning."

The helmet turned, looked at Dwarf Shaman.

"Summoning thunder," he said disinterestedly. "Very powerful stuff, like a cannon."

"...Very well," Goblin Slayer said softly. Then he asked, "You don't mind?"

The helmet turned toward High Elf Archer, who was looking at him beseechingly. Now, she averted her eyes; she clutched her cup with both hands and looked at the floor. Finally, she rubbed the outer corners of her eyes with her arms and looked up piteously. She said only: "If you're all right with it, Orcbolg."

"Good." Goblin Slayer rolled up the map and stood.

It was clear what had to be done.

It was the same thing that always had to be done.

Always and everywhere.
No matter what.
It was what he had done for the past ten years.
“Then let us go goblin slaying.”

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“Yikes! Cold! It’s cold!” Despite her yelp, Cow Girl looked quite happy as she pushed open the door of the Guild. “There’s even snow falling!”

It’s winter, all right! With those words, she came into the Guild’s waiting area, brushing the white powder off her clothes. The few adventurers inside were sitting on the long bench, warming themselves by the fire in the hearth. The small number was partly down to the time of day—and partly to the simple fact that not too many people wanted to go adventuring in winter.

It was cold, it wasn’t easy to camp out, there was snow, it was dangerous—and, oh yes: it was cold.

Stories spoke of barbarians from far beyond the northern mountains who were not the least bothered by cold like this, who claimed that this was the season when weak civilized peoples clung to what was warm.

As Cow Girl walked through the balmy room, she let out a breath. Most adventurers, eager for money as they were, saved up from spring through fall so that they could pass the winter without working.

That didn’t necessarily mean, though, that the adventurers here now were just bad at saving. Adventurers might rest in the winter, but Non-Praying Characters didn’t: goblins, fallen spirits, and monsters were still abroad.

Then, too, there were ruins whose gates opened only in the season of snows, and hidden treasures to find. Those undergoing harsh training, explorers, or adventurers of races not susceptible to the cold didn’t stop their work simply

because it was winter.

In fact, a dearth of adventurers meant more quests to go around during the winter—something of which we've spoken before.

"It certainly is winter, indeed," said Cow Girl's friend Guild Girl, picking up on the words the farmer had muttered to herself.

Cow Girl made a sound of puzzlement to see her friend looking out the window with a melancholy gaze, her chin on her hands. "What's wrong?" she asked. Someone passed her a menu as she spoke.

"Nothing," Guild Girl said with an enigmatic smile. "I was just...watching the snow come down."

"Oh..."

Drawn by the remark, Cow Girl looked out the window as well. It might be easy to miss if you were out in the middle of the swirling stuff yourself, but from inside this room it was genuinely beautiful.

Soon, the fluffy flakes would cover the town in white.

"I hope he's okay..."

Guild Girl was only whispering to herself; she didn't say who she hoped would be okay, or what he was doing that put him in danger.

It didn't stop Cow Girl from putting a hand to her ample bosom and whispering, "He'll be fine." Then she added, "I think he's been to the snowy mountain before."

"Oh really?" Guild Girl said, blinking at this unexpected new information. "I didn't know that. So he's been there before..."

"He never did tell me what he was doing there, though."

Everyone has certain things they don't want to talk about. He was always taciturn, and although it sometimes made her feel a little lonely, Cow Girl was willing to live with it.

After all, there are things I haven't told him, either.

She returned the menu with a word of thanks and tucked away her feelings into that expansive chest of hers.

"Ugh! Cold, cold, cold! That freeze is enough to hurt! I know that guy was only using his fists, but...!"

"He was...the descendent...of Frost Giants, wasn't he?"

"That fight was too long and altogether too painful."

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The door of the Guild opened, two familiar faces entering along with a gust of wind.

One of the adventurers was a handsome man with a spear leaning on his shoulder; the other a witch whose outfit left little of her generous figure to the imagination.

They shook off the snow in the doorway, then Spearman—his hair carefully coiffed—breezily approached Guild Girl.

“Ahh. You always get back before he does,” Guild Girl said, sighs mingling with her pasted-on smile. “I’m glad you’re safe, of course.”

Cow Girl got to her feet. “Good luck with work.”

“Thanks. I’ll work my hardest.” There was a pause, then, “I don’t hate him, you know?”

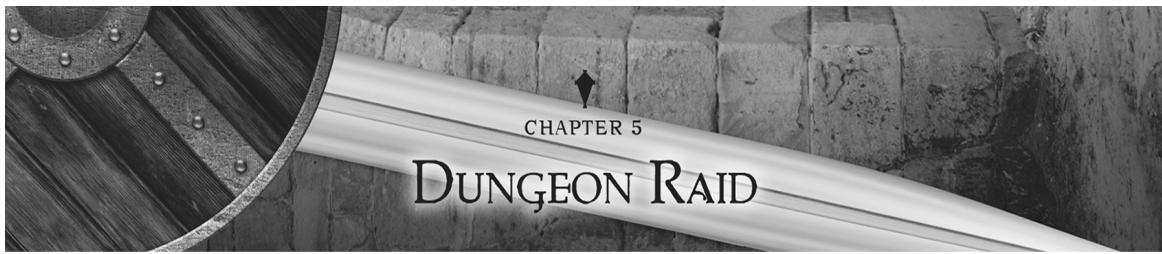
“He’s just not my favorite,” she whispered, and Cow Girl smiled at her.

“I think everything will work out fine.”

“How do you mean?”

“He’ll be back before we celebrate the passing of the year.”

I’m sure of it.



"I did *not* agree to this!"

"Ah... Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha..."

The next morning, High Elf Archer was traveling down the mountain path...enclosed in a wooden cage. Priestess was beside her, smiling awkwardly. Both of them were dressed in rags.

The elf's long ears were twitching angrily; she grabbed the bars of the cage and gave them a rattle.

The pole that ran through the top of the cage so that it could be carried was, like their outfits, all part and parcel of making the "prisoners" look realistic.

"Why do we have to be the spoils of battle?!"

"Because I and the others never would be."

With the men as captives, the act would no longer be convincing. Goblin Slayer offered no harbor in this storm.

He had dyed his always-grimy armor black from head to toe; it was a very strange sight. He could have passed for the spirit of some dead soldier recently back from the grave.

"Ho! Oh! The foolish lady adventurers begin to rail again!" said an evil-looking dwarf who was carrying the cage from the front. "Master monk, perhaps we should teach them a lesson..."

"Heh-heh-heh! Fine offerings they will make to the god of external knowledge. I shall let you do what you wish with them." The response came from a dark lizard monk who walked ahead, smiling maliciously. He had been quite enthusiastic ever since his disguise had been prepared and he had painted his face and scales, using pigment to cover

them in uncanny patterns.

High Elf Archer bit her lip with a growl and changed targets.

"Hey, you know it's okay to be a little angrier!!"

"Oh, I think...I've sort of gotten used to this kind of thing..." Priestess, sitting in one corner of the cage hugging her knees, smiled in defeat. The expression, combined with her willowy body and delicate beauty, made her look the very picture of a prisoner. A fine performance. Of course, the real problem was that it wasn't a performance at all.

"..."

The cage had one other inhabitant, someone who hadn't said a word. It was Noble Fencer.

She, too, sat in a corner of the cage with her legs drawn up to her chest—whence she stared into space and didn't move a muscle.

Her fair skin, however, had lost its luster; her rose-tinted lips had turned blue.

Priestess came over to her slowly, moving on all fours.

"Um, aren't you cold...?"

".....I'm fine," Noble Fencer said simply.

Normally, that might have been enough to deter Priestess, but this time she only giggled a little bit.

It was a better response than *Sure* or *I see* or *Is that so?* or *All right, then.*

She thought back to how *he* had been when they first met; he wouldn't have offered more than one of those.

"Me, I'm cold... So I'm going to keep close to you, okay?"

".....Do what you want."

Noble Fencer looked away pointedly. Priestess nodded, even though the fighter couldn't see her, then drew her knees up like the other girl.

The snowy path seemed very long. The cage swayed back and forth in the blizzard.

They were marching toward the fortress that towered upon the snowy mountain. It was not something that would

be easy or pleasant for the women to reach on foot.

So...were they trying to be kind by making us play prisoners?



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There was insensitive, and then there was insensitive, Priestess thought, holding gently to Noble Fencer's shoulders.

"*Hachoo!*" Someone gave a dainty sneeze from the cold.

She tried to cover her red face with her mouth, but it was too late. The elf's sharp ears had picked up the direction of the sound, in which she now looked with a grin. Noble Fencer was staring at Priestess in a way that was not very ladylike.

"I... I couldn't help it. It's cold out."

".....Yes. It is," Noble Fencer muttered, but there was a hint of a smile at the edges of her lips. Priestess was sure of it.

Ohhh...

Part of her was proud to have evoked this reaction—but she was a little too embarrassed to consider it a lucky break.

"You're right, though," High Elf Archer said, the color of her face uninspiring. "It really is cold out here, especially in this getup." Her ears twitched restlessly. "I think my ears are going to freeze clean off."

"They don't call it the snowy mountain for nothing," Goblin Slayer said from outside the cage. He signaled Dwarf Shaman to stop. Then he reached into his item pouch and pulled out a blanket, although its usefulness against the cold was minimal.

"It's a bitter wind," Dwarf Shaman said. "What do you say, Scaly—er, monk?"

"I myself must dress warmly lest I be rendered immobile." The lizardman was wearing his normal outfit, augmented with a very heavy cloak. He narrowed his eyes slightly. "Some say the fearsome nagas were annihilated by the chill."

"Racial weakness, eh? No helping it, then. What say we get a fire going and warm our bones?"

Dwarf Shaman reached into his bag of catalysts for a flint, along with one or two large stones.

“Dancing flame, salamander’s fame. Grant us a share of the very same.”

No sooner had he intoned the words than the stones in his hand began to glow gently from within. The casting of Kindle consumed one of his spells—but none of them considered it a waste.

“The stones won’t burn, just warm up, so—yipes! Hot, hot! It’s a good compromise.”

“I’ve got some very bad memories of that spell,” High Elf Archer said, reflexively covering her leg. Dwarf Shaman snorted.

“If you don’t like it, I don’t have to give you one.”

Shortly thereafter, the rocks were nicely heated; Dwarf Shaman wrapped them in cloth with a practiced hand and placed them in the cage. Even High Elf Archer, who had looked none too pleased just a moment before, accepted a stone, blinking.

“Er, thanks. You’re pretty considerate, for a dwarf.”

“Th-thank you...!” Priestess said.

“...”

Each of the three had her own reaction. Dwarf Shaman simply thumped his belly with a *‘Tis nothing!*, causing High Elf Archer to sigh.

“You could stand to be a little more open about your feelings,” the dwarf said. “Still and all. Beard-cutter, got anything for us?”

“Hmm. I had intended to wait until we arrived at the castle, but...” He grabbed a handful of something in his item pouch and pulled it out easily. He tossed it into the cage, where Priestess caught it.

In her hand were several small rings, each set with a blue gem.

“Those rings have the Breathe spell sealed inside,” Goblin Slayer said calmly. This was a spell that would allow one to breathe freely.

About the only spell caster Priestess could think of who

might be capable of doing such tricks as this was Witch. Even if the thought of the buxom magician made Priestess keenly aware of her own all-too-thin body.

She put that aside and said, "Goblin Slayer, sir, if you're giving us rings to breathe underwater, does that mean...?"

In the back of her mind, Priestess pictured those ruins they had visited, the ones ruled over by an ogre. Goblin Slayer had used a scroll inscribed with the Gate spell to launch a high-pressure jet of water transported from the bottom of the sea toward the monster.

"Of course you have that," Priestess said.

"The rings won't work for long," Goblin Slayer said sharply. "But they will help take the edge off the cold, even out here in the snow."

"Awesome! Why didn't you say so sooner, Orcbolg?!"

High Elf Archer clapped her hands, flicked her ears, and with a great show of joy put the ring on her finger.

"Mmmm!" she said. To all appearances, it was true that the ring helped with the cold. Perhaps it made sense, of a sort: snow was just frozen water, after all.

"The ring alone doesn't do that much, but combined with the dwarf's stone, I'm pretty warm," the elf said.

"Oh, uh... Let me try, then..." With a good deal of reluctance, Priestess put on her ring. The moment she did so, the chill was blunted all around her body, as if she had buried herself in a blanket.

"Oh!" she exclaimed involuntarily. "This is amazing!"

"Isn't it?" High Elf Archer said, closing her eyes and looking as proud as if she had come up with the rings herself.

Dwarf Shaman, listening to this, snorted out a laugh.

"Hey, what?" grumbled High Elf Archer, pouting.

"Goodness..." Priestess sighed and looked at Noble Fencer just beside her. She was met with a forceful gaze and icy eyes. "Here, why don't you try a ring, too?"

".....I don't need it," Noble Fencer replied, shaking her

head so hard her golden hair quivered violently. “.....I’m not cold.”

“Come on, how can you say that...?”

Suddenly, Priestess remembered the younger girls at the Temple. It was the sort of thing that they would have said pointedly (whatsoever their reasons) when they went out in winter in only the thinnest vestments, even as their noses dripped with snot.

Gently, Priestess took Noble Fencer’s hand. As expected, it was freezing cold.

“Here, I’ll help you put it on.”

“.....I told you, I’m not—*achoo!*” She sneezed, then quickly looked away from the surprised Priestess. “.....I’m not cold.”

“...Sure, sure.” Priestess struggled to suppress a laugh. “I’ll make sure everyone knows. But I’m still going to put this ring on you.”

“.....Hrm.”

And so, no longer taking no for an answer, Priestess slid the ring onto the fighter’s finger.

The blue stones glittered on the girls’ hands.

“Heh! Guess I can’t run away anymore now that I’m wearing this.” Even High Elf Archer seemed to be getting in on the fun, giggling as she spoke.

“.....”

Noble Fencer remained silent and sullen, paying the others no mind, but the three of them stuck close to the warm stones. The warming effect granted by their rings with the pretty blue stones might not last very long—but the rings themselves would be left over.

“Heyo, girls, that’s enough chitchat. Back to looking frightened.” Dwarf Shaman tried to look as menacing as he could in hopes of encouraging them in their act.

“Come on, dwarf, you don’t *have* to spoil the moment!”

“Moment? Speak for yourself, Long-Ears. What kind of slaves show up laughing and gossiping?”

When he put it that way, she couldn't very well argue. High Elf Archer pursed her lips in annoyance but went quiet.

"Take the lead," Goblin Slayer said. "My night vision is too poor."

In fact, it would be quite unusual for an agent of chaos to carry a torch. Goblin Slayer took the pole of the cage on his shoulder, now following Lizard Priest.

"Leave it to me. Best you follow closely, my wandering knight." With a hissing, throaty chuckle, Lizard Priest moved forward in somber strides.

The great black gate of the fortress was nearly before them, impossible to miss against the snow-whitened mountain.

§

"We request entrance!"

Lizard Priest's booming voice could be heard even over the howling of the blizzard. A dragon's roar, indeed. There was no way the fortress's inhabitants could have missed him.

"Your visitor is a servant of the god of external knowledge, a priest of the eye of the green moon! Brothers, will you not open this gate to me?!"

Lizard Priest was (in fact) a cleric, and one who had applied himself long and diligently enough to rise to Silver rank. He had the bearing to pose as a high-placed member of any religion.

As the last echo of his voice vanished into the storm, Dwarf Shaman nudged Goblin Slayer with his elbow.

"Hard to believe he's just acting, eh? I don't think the little girl would quite have been up to it."

"True."

"Given how scantily clad shrine maidens of the evil gods tend to be, it might've been interesting, though."

"Is that so?"

"What's this? I thought you liked her display at the festival. Don't you want to dress her up?"

"I'm not interested."

The two spoke quickly and quietly, facing forward so they would still seem to be faithful disciples of Lizard Priest.

After a moment, Dwarf Shaman said, "I wonder if this goblin paladin or whatever is strong. What do you think, Beard-cutter?"

"I don't know," he murmured. "But we should operate on the assumption that he's stronger than us."

"You mean so that whatever the reality is, we'll be prepared?"

"Yes."

"I suppose if we assumed he was a fool and he got the drop on us, that would only prove we were foolish."

Goblins were stupid, but they weren't fools. Such had always been one of Goblin Slayer's most important tenets. He nodded wordlessly at Dwarf Shaman.

"Hmmm." There was no response to Lizard Priest's summons. The gate remained shut fast, the only answer the crying of the wind.

Very well, then. Lizard Priest gathered up the sleeve of his ostentatiously colored robe and withdrew something from it: a wood-carved eye, the work of Dwarf Shaman, made in imitation of the brand they had found. This he held up.

"The blue eye of the god of external knowledge looks upon you! Brothers, those who share in knowing, open now this gate!"

At last, something happened.

The very slightest of gaps appeared beneath the gate. This was followed by a clatter of pulleys, and gears turned by chains, and with a mighty groan the door began to open.

Goblin Slayer watched the gate with absolute concentration. How many goblins would he find operating it? Whatever the number, their enemy had a huge fighting force. Now things were getting interesting.

"Um... This *is* going to be okay...isn't it?"

At the soft but unexpected voice from behind him, Goblin Slayer moved only his eyes behind his helmet. From the other side of the bars, Priestess was looking at him with a trace of nervousness.

"Do you think they'll...throw us straight in the dungeon or...or anything?"

"Most likely." Goblin Slayer nodded, but only the tiniest bit—the goblins could see him. "It's better than being made a sacrifice."

"Is... Is it?"

"Yes."

"But...you'll rescue us, right?"

"That's my intention."

Priestess opened her mouth to say something further, then quickly closed it again. Her expression softened as if she had given up.

"Well... All right, then."

With that, she exhaled gently. Even with the various magical heaters, it fogged the moment it left her mouth.

He could have said *It'll be all right*, or *You can trust me*, or *I won't let the goblins lay a finger on you*—anything to give the girls some comfort. But he hadn't. He never did.

Of course, if he were suddenly all warm and cuddly, she might suspect that someone had stolen his armor. But still...

He is truly hopeless, she thought. She didn't know why it made her feel like smiling, but she suppressed the impulse. She could feel Noble Fencer beside her, her body stiff; if from nervousness or fear, Priestess didn't know.

"It's okay," Priestess said. "Goblin Slayer is here. Everyone's here."

"They're coming," High Elf Archer said sharply, picking up her ears.

"GROOOBR!"

The creature that appeared was small beside the gate it emerged from, and its yell was slight compared with that of

Lizard Priest.

It was a single goblin, dressed in tattered priest's robes. He was no doubt trying to look as intimidating as possible, but his little, unsteady steps looked rather comical. Yet, somehow the silly quality, as if he was a caricature of a proud high priest, made him uncanny as well.

"GORARO! GORBB!!"

The goblin stopped in front of Lizard Priest and gestured imperiously, waving his hand and screeching something. Lizard Priest, still holding up the holy sign, nodded gravely along. Goblin Slayer and Dwarf Shaman kept their heads bowed like good disciples, silent and without talking.

"What's he saying?" High Elf Archer whispered to Priestess.

"No idea," she murmured back, shaking her head. How was she to understand the goblin language? "Do you think that's the goblin paladin?"

"He sort of looks more like a high priest to me."

".....You're wrong." Noble Fencer's voice interrupted their whispering. ".....That's...not him."

The fire of anger burned in her eyes; Priestess couldn't miss it.

Oh...

A little thought made it all too clear where the goblin had gotten his priestly vestments.

"It's okay...." she said, hugging Noble Fencer. She wasn't sure her feelings came across, but she hoped so.

Now, then.

"In that case, might we request an audience with the ruler of this fortress? The paladin himself?"

"GORA! GORARARU!"

"Oh, these? These are my two faithful servants. And these others, my...gift." Lizard Priest made a sweeping gesture that encompassed the cage; he looked truly lordly. "We managed to capture a few pathetic adventurer girls. One of whom, I might add, already bore the mark of an offering."

“ORRRG! GAROOM!”

“Ah, very much so, I understand. Lead us to the prison. We must cut off their limbs so they don’t escape.”

The goblin priest nodded and, with a gesture that was a comical imitation of Lizard Priest’s own, motioned the party inside.

Naturally, Lizard Priest didn’t understand goblin speech any more than the rest of them did. But their language often sounded like a child throwing a tantrum, and the meaning was generally about the same:

I want that. Gimme. He did it. It’s his fault.

What to do, then? The lithe tongue hissed a prayer:

“O Mapusaurus, ruler of the earth. Permit me to join your pack, howsoever briefly.”

This was the Communicate miracle, a work of telepathy. By borrowing some of the power of his forebears, who had hunted in packs, Lizard Priest was able to understand and make himself understood.

“Nothing can go forward if the two sides don’t understand each other. Normally this spell is used for evangelism, but...”

Such was what he had told them around the table at the inn the night before, sitting beside Dwarf Shaman, who worked tirelessly on his sewing.

“I suspect it will be necessary for us at some point to learn a few words of the goblin tongue.”

That had been Goblin Slayer’s very serious response. And now...

“Phew! Looks like it worked, somehow,” Dwarf Shaman said.

“We are still only through the gate. Don’t let down your guard.”

“Y’don’t have to tell me twice.”

The dwarf let out a short breath. Goblin Slayer shot him a look, then took in their surroundings.

Goblins.

They were in the courtyard of an old castle. Once upon a time, a spring had delivered water to the area, and banquets had perhaps been held in this marble plaza. But now, the spring was dried up; the place was covered in snow, all signs of grass and trees vanished from the garden, any sight of knights or nobles long since past. Now it was the province of goblins, and as such, it had become a waste heap caked with blood and filth.

"This is a dwarven fortress from the Age of the Gods? Look what's become of it..."

For someone who loved adventure and the unknown as much as High Elf Archer did, this pained whisper was understandable.

"They have no idea how valuable this is..."

"Look at them all, though," Priestess said, biting her lip in an attempt to suppress the tremble in her voice. "We have to do something about this..."

It was a stroke of good luck that the goblins saw them only as pitiful offerings. The little monsters knew how easily such prisoners could be reduced to weeping and sniveling, no matter how proud they looked or sounded.

The goblin horde numbered well beyond the dozens.

Goblin goons were everywhere: the garden, upon the walls, in the watchtower and the crenels. Each of them wore poor equipment—although it probably seemed of the highest make to goblin eyes—and each of them was watching the newcomers closely.

Their gazes carried flashes of curiosity and lust, but mostly they were filled with a terrifying hunger. The eyes of an animal, of a brainless *beast*, would have been better. At least wild creatures didn't stare with such malice and greed.

"....."

Priestess forgot herself in her efforts to shield Noble Fencer from their eyes; she hugged the other girl harder. She knew from experience that it would only egg the goblins on, but she did it anyway.

“.....”

In the meantime, Goblin Slayer was carefully observing the environment from under his helmet. The geography, the architecture: if he didn't take it all in, then he was almost certain to die in whatever he might attempt.

Death hardly concerned him; but what he couldn't stand was the thought that these goblins would remain to work their evil.

“GORARA.”

“Mm. Come, now. He says to follow him,” the lizard said, going after the goblin.

“Sure thing, master priest. C'mon, tin man.”

At Dwarf Shaman's encouragement, Goblin Slayer hefted the pole of the cage.

They left the courtyard full of goblins, heading down a staircase that dribbled with rotting runoff from the trash. Their footsteps echoed eerily in the stone basement. It was dim and gloomy, and an indescribable stench rose up from somewhere. They doubted it was from a storehouse. Why keep food in cages?

They were in the dungeon.

The bars and locks were of dwarven make, sturdy yet beautiful. The chains within were equally breathtaking. Perhaps they had been used, at some time long past, to bind agents of chaos, or those evildoers who would have threatened this fortress.

Now, though, this place was under goblin control, and these rooms were the last residence of unfortunate young women. Imagine such a poor soul chained down here, trying to stop her nose against the unmistakable smell of rotting corpses...

“...”

Priestess heard a sound. It was Noble Fencer, who had clenched her teeth and let out a low groan. Her body was stiff in Priestess's arms.

“ORAGARR.”

The goblin fiddled with the rusty lock, and the door of the cell came open.

The floor was slick with some unidentifiable liquid. The chains were nearly red with rust.

Being underground, the air carried a chill, though it was better than being outside. The stink of rot drifted along with the cold.

There was only a hole in which to do one's business, and it was already full of waste. As if that weren't enough, a human arm had been tossed carelessly into the pit as well.

High Elf Archer gave a strangled gurgle that echoed loudly. We need hardly mention elves' superior senses...

Although human eyes couldn't see as well as elven ones, the smell and the sense of the place all reached back to Priestess's formative experiences. She gave a scratchy, whistling intake of breath. She was used to this sort of thing—maybe, probably, so she liked to think—but even so...

"...Eugh..."

Even so, she couldn't help but think back to that first adventure. The young warrior striding before her, then convulsing with poison before her eyes. The wizard *he* had helped to kill. And the fighter, swarmed by goblins, violated in the worst possible way.

All instead of her. They had died while she had survived. While she was alive now. But wouldn't her turn come one day?

It's okay. It's okay. It's... It's okay.

She recited the name of the Earth Mother under her breath to keep her teeth from chattering. She glanced at *him*.

Or at least, she tried.

"GAROU!"

"Hh—ahh!"

She felt something grab her head; she screamed. The goblin priest had reached into the cage and pulled on her hair with inhospitable violence.

“ORAGARAO!”

Open the cage and put this girl in the cell!

Whatever deity they were to be sacrificed to, it seemed it would begin with her.

Dwarf Shaman and Goblin Slayer exchanged a look and nodded, then set down the cage.

Lizard Priest said gravely, “That is well and good, then. However, if you mean to...*enjoy* these offerings, first I must meet the paladin, and—”

“Hrrraaaaahhhhhh!”

As the door of the cage was opened, Noble Fencer did something altogether unexpected: she forced her way out of the cage, reaching out for the goblin who was amusing himself with Priestess and wrapping her hands around his neck.

“OGA...?!”

“Hraah! Haaaaahhhh!” Howling like a wild animal, Noble Fencer took advantage of her larger body size to slam into the monster.

“GORARA...?!”

“Eep!” Priestess yelped. The half-crazed goblin priest had pulled a stone knife from his belt and grazed her with it. A thin red line of blood appeared on her cheek, and she shrank back. Even as she did so, Noble Fencer knocked the knife from the creature’s hand.

“ORAGAGAGA?!?!?”

“Goblin... Goblin! Goblin!!”

She straddled him, lashing out with her fists. Each time he hollered and struck out, fresh bruises appeared on Noble Fencer’s pale skin, but she paid them no mind.

“Aaaagh! Die! Die, you piece of filth!”

A nose broke; eye sockets shattered. Teeth bent. A chin was struck.

“GARAO?!?”

Even goblins were not apt to miss a disturbance of this magnitude. The other creature in the basement room, who

had been waiting in anticipation of having its fun with the prisoners, raised a cry.

Then the goblin guard did a very goblin-like thing: rather than face down the attacker, he dashed up the stairs to summon his comrades.

“Feh.” Goblin Slayer clicked his tongue. His movements were rapid and precise.

Dumping the cage to the ground—and ignoring the indignant objections of High Elf Archer—he drew the sword at his hip and sent it flying.

The blade cut through the air soundlessly before burying itself in the head of the goblin on the stairs.

“ORAG?!”

The creature came rolling back down the staircase, convulsing, not comprehending what had happened to him. Goblin Slayer leaped at him immediately.

“Hmph.” He gave the sword a twist, severing the spinal cord, and when this definitive final blow had been dealt, he wrenched the sword out and kicked the body away. It tumbled the rest of the way down the stairs, landing in the pool of waste and sinking down into it. That would hide the body.

However, Goblin Slayer, never one to let down his guard, kept a close eye on the top of the staircase, their link to the surface.

“GORA?”

Just as he suspected. A patrolling goblin had picked up the ruckus on the stairs and was coming to investigate.

Goblin Slayer quickly adjusted his grip on his sword and called out to his companions, “We’ve been detected. Another one is coming.”

“Aaaaagh! Aaahhhhhh!”

Noble Fencer was still blindly beating the dead goblin priest. The creature’s hideous, uneven teeth broke the skin on her fists, but she hardly noticed. In only seconds, both her hands were covered in blood.

"St-stop! Please stop!" Priestess begged, approaching the young woman. "This isn't the time to—ouch!" One of the flailing arms shoved her backward and she landed on her behind.

The slap of cold stone against her frail bottom was rather painful, but she pushed the sensation aside and said, "Er, ah, shall I use Silence...?"

"Nah, lassie, no sound at all would attract as much attention as too much sound," Dwarf Shaman said. "In which case, ahem..."

He began digging through his bag, muttering as he passed over first one object and then another.

"Looks like there's no choice," Goblin Slayer muttered, gripping his sword tighter. When he took care of the goblin that was coming toward them now, it would inevitably make the situation worse. Should he simply take on the goblins now? No... The odds were too much against them.

As he was making these rapid calculations, Lizard Priest, who had been quiet until that moment, spoke up. "Mistress ranger, give a scream!"

"Wha? Er, who, m-me?"

High Elf Archer, who had been trying to stop Noble Fencer, was caught off guard by this sudden summons, her ears bouncing in surprise.

Lizard Priest slapped his tail against the ground in irritation. There was a note of anger in his voice as he said, "Do as I ask and scream! We haven't any time!"

"Y-yeah, sure, okay. A scream... A scream..."

She took a deep breath through her well-formed lips, opened her mouth, and...

"N-noooooooo! Stop! Stooooooooopppp!"

Her voice was so clear and piercing it could have cut thread.

Elf voices carry very well. Her shout echoed through the basement, up the stairs, and reached the surface, if only just.

“GORARA.”

The goblin near the top of the stairs seemed to grasp what was going on. He stopped, picturing the brutalized woman. He made a vulgar gesture and glanced at Goblin Slayer where he stood on the stairs.

“GORARURU?”

Goblin Slayer shrugged, and the goblin gave an ugly laugh and a dismissive wave of his hand.

“You’ll be by later, is it?”

Goblin Slayer stared at the creature as it walked away, the disgusting smile still on its face.

They had managed to buy back a small measure of the time they had wasted. He wouldn’t squander it again.

The original plan had been to take the “sacrifices” to the master of the fortress for inspection. If there was going to be a chance to take out the goblin paladin—if such a thing existed!—that would most likely be it.

But the plan was in tatters now.

“Well, I expected as much,” Goblin Slayer muttered dispassionately as he closed the door, put in the blocks, and then went back down the stairs.

The guard’s body had floated back up to the top of the waste pool; without hesitation, he kicked it down again.

He looked over to where Noble Fencer was still pummeling the corpse of the goblin priest. “Bring that goblin over here, too. It isn’t much, but we’ll hide him.” The heavy slap of struck flesh had transformed into a watery *splorch*.

“Come...on... Stop already!” High Elf Archer said, tearing Noble Fencer off the corpse. She grabbed the girl by the shoulders and pulled, throwing her body weight into it. She might have looked delicate, but such was the difference in strength between a Silver and a Porcelain rank that she managed to dislodge the warrior.

“Excuse me, but *what* do you think you’re doing?” High Elf Archer demanded. “I thought we explained how this was

going to go!"

Noble Fencer, now sprawled on the dirty floor, regarded the archer with dark eyes. ".....I have to kill the goblins."

"Aww, man...!"

It was no use trying to convince her otherwise. High Elf Archer pursed her lips, making her displeasure plain. Her ears stood up in annoyance amidst her disheveled hair. That unpredictability was what she liked best about humans. She had to admit she even enjoyed complaining about all of Orcbolg's strange decisions. At least sometimes. Just a little bit...!

The adventurer who sat before her—both hands covered in blood but nonetheless a serene expression on her face—was different. How she was different, High Elf Archer couldn't exactly say, but she found it unmistakable.

"That's why I was against this...!"

"I'm just glad we got away without suddenly having to let off a spell... I guess," Dwarf Shaman said, sighing and shaking the wine flask at his hip. Hearing a splash from within, he took out the stopper and took a long swig. Then he brushed droplets out of his beard and burped once. The spirits of wine were just right for a danger narrowly averted.

"This isn't what we planned on, but we've got to play the hand we're dealt."

"Yes, I suppose there's nothing for it. It's better to have her with us than to leave her alone to cause trouble unaccounted for." Lizard Priest sounded awfully calm.

High Elf Archer raised an eyebrow. "And what if she gets us caught up in something else, something even worse?" She put her hands on her hips and glared at Noble Fencer. Her anger at the young woman, who was standing there with her hands still covered in gore as though none of this concerned her, seemed to be welling up again.

Priestess, sensitive to what was going on, tried to head things off. "C-calm down, just please, stay calm! This isn't the time to be getting angry...!"

“You should be the angriest of all!”

“Wha?!”

High Elf Archer suddenly stuck out her hand and brushed Priestess’s cheek. The girl winced involuntarily at the stinging pain. Goblin weapons might be crude, but a blade was a blade.

The red line along her cheek was still dribbling blood.

“She decided to launch a surprise attack, and you’re the one who paid for it!”

Priestess’s eyes flickered. She pressed her small hand to her cheek.

“I’m fine,” she insisted. After some consideration, the expression she settled on was a smile, one that said she could deal with a little scratch. Her brave face only seemed to infuriate High Elf Archer further.

“You’re not fine, you’re hurt—!”

At least—yes, at the very least, that adventurer could apologize to Priestess.

High Elf Archer reached out as if to grab Noble Fencer, who stood staring into space—

“Calm down.”

“Orcbolg...!”

—and found a grimy gauntlet stopping her.

The smallest of tears seeped out at the edges of High Elf Archer’s eyes. It was her agitated emotions that were to blame. She couldn’t be calm just because they told her to.

“But—but she said she’d come with us, and now look—!” High Elf Archer said petulantly, pointing at Noble Fencer. She just wanted to make herself understood.

But Goblin Slayer shook his head. “I’m telling you to calm down.”

He grabbed the murdered goblin and dragged him, robes and all, into the pool of waste. With a disgusting sound, that corpse, too, sank into the muck.

Goblin Slayer looked away from High Elf Archer, whose shoulders were heaving with her angry breath.

"Hey."

"Oh, y-yes!" Priestess said, quickly straightening up.

"Start by attending to yourself, then give her first aid. That hand will rot."

There was a moment's silence, followed by a grunt. Goblin Slayer seemed to be weighing whether to go on.

Then: "There will be a scar, as well."

"...Sure. Should I use a potion...?"

"Start with herbs."

Priestess nodded with a "Yes, sir," then pattered over to Noble Fencer. Antiseptic and pain-killing herbs wouldn't have the dramatic effects of a potion, but they were still tried and true. Goblin Slayer made sure Priestess had applied the ointment to her cheek correctly, then he nodded.

"Sorry for the trouble, but please check whether there are any survivors among the prisoners."

"On it." Dwarf Shaman took another swig of his wine as he answered. He was always quick to respond to a call. "Come with me, Scaly. I'm going to need help if I have to drag anyone out of any cells."

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Yes, conventional wisdom does hold that spell casters are physically weak, doesn't it!" Lizard Priest said. Just a little joke: a way of fighting back against the oppressive atmosphere of the prison.

Touching the tip of his nose with his long tongue, Lizard Priest said to Goblin Slayer, "I presume you do not mind if we tend to the injuries of any wounded we find?"

"Save your miracles," Goblin Slayer replied. "No matter what you do, there won't be any prisoners in good enough condition to join the battle."

"Indeed, a point well taken," the lizard said, making that strange gesture with his hands.

As he departed, he whispered, "I understand your feelings, but perhaps this time emotion should be left for later."

The elf's ears picked up on his murmur.

"I don't think it's enough to just say we had no other choice and let this slide," she said after a pause, her face in a pout. Goblin Slayer stood before her silently, his arms crossed.

Goblin Slayer felt that something was off—partly due to the "goblin priest," a hideous and seemingly contradictory thing if there ever was one—but the prisoners were more concerning. Supposedly, no girls had been kidnapped from the village. Which meant that they had most likely been brought here from some other village the goblins had raided.

"..."

Had the goblins forced their prisoners to walk along that snowy road, then? Was that even possible?

How large an area were the goblins operating in? And was it this "goblin paladin" leading them?

"I don't like it," Goblin Slayer said.

He had been talking to himself, but High Elf Archer replied sulkily, "You're telling me." Then, making no effort to hide the unhappy twitching of her ears, she stared into his mask and said, "Why did you bring that girl along?"

The helmet left his expression as unreadable as ever, but he answered dispassionately, "Because we need her."

"Oh we do, do we?" the ranger said, spitting out a little mocking laugh. "Well, maybe you should give her a spanking, then."

"Whatever the case, if we don't get out of here we won't be able to return home. *And*," he added, as calmly as always, "there are goblins to slay. We've taken on the challenge. We will either succeed, or we won't."

"This... This isn't the time to be talking like that...!"

"...I know."

But.

"I do...believe me, I know."

His voice sounded uncharacteristically tired. High Elf Archer suddenly found she couldn't speak.

“.....”

Orcbolg? she mouthed silently to him.

Maybe the word didn't reach him. He slowly let out a breath. “I'll stand guard. Once you're done checking the prisoners and helping anyone you can, get your equipment ready.”

“...Here?”

“That's right.”

“.....”

“I don't think you'll manage much fighting dressed that way,” he said to the elf.

Specifically, in a basement prison surrounded by waste and rot and corpses.

High Elf Archer muttered her agreement. She pressed a finger to her brow as if forcing back a headache. “Just to make sure I'm clear on this: *here*? ”

“That's right.”

“And you want us to change our clothes?”

“That's right.”

Argh, for crying out loud. Orcbolg hasn't changed a whit, has he?!

“Excuse me,” the archer said with a sigh, “but elves have this little thing called modesty...”

“If it bothers you, use this as a curtain.”

“Ergah?! ...Gah! You!”

He had grabbed a blanket from the cage and tossed it at her; it landed over her head.

High Elf Archer's expression of anger slipped for just a second; she quickly tried to get it back, but it was too late. Goblin Slayer already had his back turned anyway.

High Elf Archer set about tying the blanket securely around her neck, then changing her clothes underneath it. She couldn't help feeling pathetic.

She gleefully discarded the dirty rags she had worn in her guise as a captive adventurer, replacing them with her usual hunter's garb. She put on her armor to keep her safe in

battle; slung her bow across her back; and as for her underwear...well, forget it. She didn't understand why anyone would bother with it anyway.

Oh, man... What am I even angry about?

This wasn't like her. It wasn't like her at all. She slowly felt her anger ebbing away.

Huh?

High Elf Archer paused, mystified, as she inspected her armor. Orcbolg had given her the cold shoulder, and yet she was hardly even upset about it. Partly it was because she was used to it by now, but...

If that were all, I wouldn't care about him ignoring me when it came to her, either.

"Hrrm..." High Elf Archer's ears quivered thoughtfully as she considered this riddle.

So...there's something different when it comes to her and Orcbolg.

What could it be? How was it different?

She turned these thoughts over and over in her mind until they threatened to stir up a whirlpool.

She still didn't find an answer—what came to her instead was the one word the two of them seemed to share.

"Goblins."

Goblins, goblins, goblins, goblins, goblins, goblins!

High Elf Archer found herself trembling; the word resounded in her mind like a curse.

"Ahhh, sheesh! This just isn't good...!" She smacked her cheeks with both hands, rubbed the edges of her eyes. She couldn't seem to center herself.

She couldn't get these feelings to go away.

She couldn't find an answer.

Things were at their worst.

Yes, but.

".....There really is just one thing to do, isn't there?" She let out a groan, her ears twitching, then stuck her head out from under the blanket.

Goblin Slayer was still standing at the top of the stairs, keeping a watchful eye on the door there, his equipment at the ready.

High Elf Archer spoke softly to his back. "I'm sorry, Orcbolg." She opened her mouth but found she couldn't quite go on speaking. She looked for the words, then tried again. "I...lost my head a little."

"That happens," Goblin Slayer said, not turning around. "To you, to that girl, to me."

His words were as calm as ever, even a little cold. High Elf Archer found her cheeks nearly relaxing into a smile.

"Even you, Orcbolg?"

"That's right."

"I don't think I've ever seen it."

"Is that so?"

"It sure is."

"I see," he murmured without much interest, then turned his head.

It was just an instant. High Elf Archer remembered something Priestess had told her once. How when he was thinking, when he was about to say something—he would go silent.

"I'll tell everyone else," he said quietly. "If you think I should."

High Elf Archer poked a hand out from under the blanket and gave a reassuring wave as if to say, *It's okay*.

"Nah. I'll tell them myself." She paused, then said, "Thanks."

She pulled the blanket aside with a flutter, glad that the motion hid her face at that instant—hid the gentle smile that had crept onto it.

"You're surprisingly...considerate, Orcbolg."

"...Is that so?" Goblin Slayer murmured. Then he said, "Do it quickly. I want the other girls to change as well."

"Yeah, yeah."

She couldn't see his face—and yet, High Elf Archer

thought she knew what his expression was.
That was enough for her.

§

“Nobody there.”

“All right.”

When High Elf Archer popped her head back inside the door and delivered her report, the party quickly moved out of the basement prison.

The nauseating smell of goblin is not a pleasant thing. The stone castle was not a great deal less rank than the underground room, but somewhat, and Priestess took deep, grateful breaths.

“Is it really...okay to leave those people there?” she whispered.

“Safer than bringing them to stumble along behind us, I can only think,” Lizard Priest said.

Fortunately—or perhaps, as it were, unfortunately—they found several captive girls, wasted but alive. They had freed the young women, but as Lizard Priest said, it was impossible to bring them along.

And as important as he knew time and miracles were to the party, the fact that they had been unable even to heal the young women...

“We have to get back there and help them as soon as we can,” Priestess said, looking back regretfully.

“Right now I’m wondering if we can even help ourselves,” Dwarf Shaman muttered, feeling his way along the stone wall.

He was the one leading the party along. The stone fortress had no chinks or cracks, truly the work of dwarves. When pitted against some attacking bandits, the work of those craftsmen was going to tell.

The party walked along in formation now, with High Elf Archer scanning for enemies and Dwarf Shaman charting the

way forward.

"Anyway, Beard-cutter, where d'you plan to go? Are we heading for the main keep?"

"No," Goblin Slayer said, shaking his head. "It's still too early to attack the enemy leader."

"..."

Noble Fencer shivered at the calm declaration. To prevent any repeats of her earlier outburst, she was now second from the last; Priestess stood with her.

Ever since receiving High Elf Archer's brief but heartfelt apology, Noble Fencer had said very little.

"Never seen a blade quite like that," Dwarf Shaman had said to her. "It looks like quite a piece of work—but what's that metal?"

Then, and only then, she had murmured in response, "...Aluminum..... The blade was forged from a red gem with a lightning-hammer."

"Aluminum, is it? Can't say I've ever heard of it. Mind if I have a look?"

Instead of an answer, she shot him a glare of refusal. Dwarf Shaman only shrugged.

"Hmm," Goblin Slayer grunted. "Let us head for their storehouse first."

"Armory, or food?"

"Both. But let's start with the weapons."

"Right this way, then."

The party advanced through the stronghold like shadows, without a sound. Nobody in the group had ever carried too much in the way of noisy equipment. Only Priestess and Goblin Slayer were even wearing metal armor, and in Priestess's case it was only thin mail. Goblin Slayer was wearing mail along with his leather armor.

The only sounds in the corridor now were the shushing footsteps of fur boots, and each of them breathing.

The adventurers brought their formation together so that they were walking in a line. They were alert for traps,

keeping an eye on the area around them as well as on their companions, but they weren't nervous, and they never let their guard down.

After all, of the six adventurers there, four of them were of Silver, the third rank. Navigating labyrinths came as naturally to them as breathing.

"...Something's coming," High Elf Archer said, stopping where she stood with her ears bobbing. She crouched down and pulled out her great bow, readying an arrow and drawing it back. She was aiming at the corner just ahead.

Without a word, Goblin Slayer reached for the sword at his hip, moving out in front of Dwarf Shaman. From his new position in the order, the spell caster reached into his bag of catalysts, while Priestess gripped her sounding staff. Lizard Priest swished his tail and looked easily back over his shoulder; Noble Fencer ground her teeth.

At last they heard two sets of defenseless footsteps approaching the corner.

"..."

There was only the slightest whisper of air as a bowstring was drawn. High Elf Archer's arrow flew through space, piercing one goblin through the eye and pinning him to the wall.

"GROOAB?!" At what must have seemed like the sight of his companion collapsing against the wall, the second goblin gave a cry of confusion.

Before he ever processed what happened, a sword was growing from his throat. Goblin Slayer had thrown it at him without hesitation.

"We have to hide the bodies," he said.

"If we have to go to all that trouble anyway, why didn't we just hide in the first place?" High Elf Archer asked.

"This is better than if they had found us and the sounds of battle had alerted anyone else to our presence."

He approached the corpses with his bold stride; he pressed a boot against the bodies and pulled out the sword

and the arrow, tossing the latter to High Elf Archer.

"Urgh," she said as she caught it, as if now it suddenly bothered her; she wiped the blood off quickly. The blood of a wild animal might have been one thing, but goblin blood was not something to be tolerated.

"How many spells and miracles do you have left?" Goblin Slayer asked, glancing at his companions.

"Um..." Priestess tapped a pale finger against her lips in thought. "I haven't used any at all, so I've got three left." She counted on her fingers: Kindle they had used on the road, while Communicate they had needed upon entering the fortress. "The others have both used one each, so they each have three left, so... Nine altogether?"

"Hey, now," Dwarf Shaman said jovially. "You're not counting our new friend there." He pointed at Noble Fencer.

She had been standing at a distance, ignoring their conversation as she stared intently at the goblin corpses, but now she muttered, "...Two more."

Is that all? Priestess wondered—meaning not her spells, but the words she was going to use.

Priestess furrowed her brow but said, "Thank you very much," with as much enthusiasm as she could muster. Noble Fencer, however, pointedly continued to look away, not so much as glancing in the party's direction.

"Hmmm..." A little mutter escaped from Priestess. The gesture reminded her of the apprentice girls at the Temple—specifically, it reminded her of the most troublesome ones.

"Anyway, that's eleven in all, isn't it."

"Hmm. Certainly we aren't anywhere near exhausting our resources," Lizard Priest said. "I suppose you won't mind if we make use of a charm here or there?"

"No," Goblin Slayer said. "Consider it nine spells."

"What's this, then?" Lizard Priest said, blinking. "How did you get that number?"

"We should preserve our two Lightning spells."

Noble Fencer shuddered at this. Her eyes, as clear as

glass, fixed on Goblin Slayer. Her voice was thin and immensely quiet.

“.....Can I...kill goblins?”

“If all goes well.”

His words were so brief. Noble Fencer continued to gaze at the expressionless helmet, until finally, she gave a small nod.

“We can’t kill any *more* goblins until we get rid of the ones we’ve already done in, right?” High Elf Archer, seeming to have ignored the discussion of spells and miracles, tapped one of the dead monsters with the arrow she was still holding. Despite the cold, they had only wrapped their hips and feet in fur. Crude spears were their weapons. It looked like they hardly possessed anything in the world.

“Do you have some idea how to do it?” Goblin Slayer asked, rifling through his item pouch as he spoke.

“An idea? Hmm... Well... Oh!” Her ears jumped up eagerly. She beckoned to Dwarf Shaman with a gleam in her eyes like a mischievous child. “Dwarf, hand over your wine. The whole jug.”

“Oh-ho.” Dwarf Shaman smiled, as if there was a joke afoot. “What’s the story, Long-Ears? Looking for a little liquid inspiration?”

“Just pass it here, already.”

“Yeah, all right. There’s some left still. Don’t drink it all.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t drink it.” She pulled out the stopper with a pop and took a good sniff, frowning at the sharp smell of the spirits. “I promise, I won’t drink a drop.” And then she turned the bottle upside down and emptied the contents onto the floor.

“Oh no!” Dwarf Shaman moaned as if the world were ending. That he didn’t simply scream was testament to his instincts as an adventurer.

He did, however, look like he was going to bounce right off the ground up to High Elf Archer’s small chest as he grabbed for the jug.

"Now look what you've done, you stupid, anvil-chested—"

"I asked nicely, didn't I? Now come on, this was necessary—we have to do what we have to do."

"How is it necessary?! How can it be what we have to do?! My—my wine!"

"No, she's helped us." Goblin Slayer was already moving. He had guessed what High Elf Archer had in mind; now he wiped away the dripping blood with a rag and seated the corpses against the wall. He tilted the heads down so their wounds wouldn't be obvious, and kicked the spear one of the goblins had dropped so that it rolled over to his side.

"Hrrrrrgh...!" whined Dwarf Shaman.

"Heh! See? I helped. Oh, don't worry. I'll get you a new bottle later." Looking quite pleased with herself, High Elf Archer set the wine jug next to the goblins.

"Oh...!" Priestess said. Her eyes started to shine, and she nodded in understanding. "There isn't a goblin alive who takes his work seriously, is there?"

"That's the idea," the ranger replied. She winked and made a giggle deep in her throat.

Now the corpses seemed to be nothing more than two drunk goblins. The strong smell of spirits would help mask the odor of blood.

A couple of goblins who got to drinking while on guard duty and then fell asleep—surely it would be nothing remarkable.

"If we can't keep them secret, we can hide them in plain sight," High Elf Archer said.

"But why do we have to use *my* wine to do it?" Dwarf Shaman moaned, biting his nails with regret as he watched the liquid dribble along the stone floor.

Lizard Priest gave him a hearty slap on the back. "Be not dismayed, I shall treat you as well. We will need to toast our ranger's fine turn of mind."

Dwarf Shaman looked up at the priest with an unhappy grunt, but Lizard Priest rolled his eyes in his head.

“Do you not think so, milord Goblin Slayer?”

“I do.” He nodded. “Drinks will be on me.”

After this offer, there was really no more room for complaint. Dwarf Shaman groaned and muttered again and finally let out a deep breath.

“Hrm. Erm. Well... If Scaly and Beard-cutter both feel that way, then...”

“Indeed,” Lizard Priest said. “But for now, we must hurry. Where is the armory?”

“Sure, right. Over here.” Dwarf Shaman led the party off with a wave of his hand.

Immediately beside him was High Elf Archer, chuckling triumphantly.

“You long-eared, anvil-chested...! When we get back to the bar, you’re gonna treat me ‘til your head spins!”

“Yeah, whatever. I’ll keep you watered for as long as you like, so don’t get so angry.”

And the argument went on. Priestess smiled to see them trading friendly jabs again.

Thank goodness.

In the basement earlier, there had been a real argument. It’s never a good feeling to see your comrades fight with each other. So now...

I’m really, really glad.

With that heartfelt thought in her mind, Priestess knelt down right where she was. She held her sounding staff in both hands, as if clinging to it. Lizard Priest looked at her and nodded. *We’re going ahead*, he seemed to be saying.

Then Priestess closed her eyes, just as she always did.

“.....What are you doing?”

The voice, quiet, came unexpectedly from beside her.

“Oh, uh, I—well...” Priestess felt her heart beat faster, but she nodded without rising. “I’m praying for the repose of their souls... Although I’m doing it quickly, because we don’t have much time.”

Suddenly, she felt her hand, wrapped around her

sounding staff, grasped by that of Noble Fencer. Priestess looked mystified, but Noble Fencer shook her head firmly.

“.....That’s not necessary.”

“Huh? But...”

Before she could say that everyone is the same in death, Noble Fencer gave one of the bodies a vicious kick. The goblin, which had been leaning against the wall, slumped over onto the ground.

“.....It’s not necessary. Not...for...bastards...like these...!”

Noble Fencer seemed to be working herself up to speak even more forcefully when it came:

“Let’s go.”

Low and sharp, blunt and dispassionate—just the way he always spoke.

They looked up and found that the rest of the party had proceeded ahead into the fortress; only Goblin Slayer had remained behind with them. His sword and shield were at the ready, and his helmet turned slowly, scanning the area.

Was he...waiting for us?

Priestess did not, of course, ask the question aloud. She didn’t need to.

He was always waiting for them. She had learned that well in the last year.

“Okay... We’ll be right there.” Quickly, but with care, Priestess closed her eyes and prayed that the dead goblins would be well in the afterlife. She stood, dusting off her knees, then smiled at Noble Fencer.

“Come on. Shall we go?”

“.....”

Noble Fencer said nothing but averted her eyes, and then she headed after the party at a stiff pace.

Well, now. Her expression changing to a confused smile, Priestess scratched her cheek and shook her head. “Does she...dislike me?”

“I don’t know.” Goblin Slayer shook his own head firmly,

but then the helmet cocked curiously. “Do you wish to be friends with her?”

“Hmm...” Now that the question came up, Priestess put a finger to her lips and looked at the ground and thought.

I just...can't seem to leave these people alone.

The thought was rather, although not entirely, similar to one she frequently directed at the adventurer in front of her.

She smiled, her expression like a blooming flower.

“You know, I think I do.”

“Is that so?” He nodded. “Then you should do so.”

That was all Goblin Slayer said before he turned and walked off. Her “I will!” followed after him.

Ahead, down the dark tunnel, their companions waited for them.

The armory was not far away now.

§

Even goblins are smart enough to lock a door. Including the huge metal one they found in one corner of the stone labyrinth. There was even a step stool placed nearby, the knob being out of reach of the diminutive goblins.

“Right, time to switch,” Dwarf Shaman said.

High Elf Archer stepped up to try herself against the door. “Sure, just leave it to me...is what I’d like to say, but I’m not sure I’m that confident...”

First, she scraped the surface of the door with a bud-tipped arrow she drew from her quiver. Confirming that there was nothing there, she perked up her big ears, listening for any sound inside the room.

She didn’t hear anything moving. Given how dank and polluted this goblin hideout was, it was surprising not to hear so much as a rat scurrying around. Goblins no doubt found rodents to be good snacks—a subject she didn’t want to think about, although she had to admit she was grateful for the fact.

"I'm pretty sure there's nothing inside... I think," she said.

"Open it," Goblin Slayer instructed. "Destroy the door if you need to."

"In the worst case, we might," Lizard Priest said. He brought his hands together in a strange gesture, then took out a dragon fang that could act as a catalyst. "We wouldn't want any goblins sneaking up behind, so we shall act as guards."

"Right you are," Dwarf Shaman responded, and the three men circled up around the women.

High Elf Archer pulled a branch as thin as a needle from somewhere in her outfit and began looking for the keyhole. Her movements were small but fairly clumsy. She was a ranger, not by any means a thief or a scout. An adventurer in town had taught her simple trap disarmament and how to pick a lock—along with a touch of gambling. Granted, all of these had been very useful in satisfying her own curiosity...

"Careful now, okay?" She glanced to the side as she worked, clicking her tongue. "If you stand right next to me like that, you might get caught by any trap that goes off."

"But I'll also be able to give you first aid right away," Priestess said with a cheerful smile. She had sat smack on the ground right next to High Elf Archer. She had a firm grip on her sounding staff so that she could start praying at a moment's notice.

"Honestly, I wish I had the Precog or Luck miracles."

Her concern for her friend High Elf Archer was only half the reason. The other half was disappointment about her own powerlessness.

"Well, it's not your fault. It's the deity who decides which miracles you get, right?"

It was kind of High Elf Archer to point this out, but not being able to do anything to help still stung.

Maybe the elf had a sense of what was going through Priestess's mind, because with a trickle of nervous sweat, she said, "We really could use an actual scout here..."

"Mm," Priestess said, "but you're so kind as to seek out traps and pick locks for us anyway..."

We're counting on you, okay?

At that, High Elf Archer's ears flicked modestly.

Now, she was going to have to concentrate. Goblins might not be smart enough to build very subtle traps, but a dwarf fortress left over from the Age of the Gods might be home to more tricks than what the little devils had put there themselves.

A keyhole that sprayed poison gas, or a doorknob that grew unbearably hot were the best things they could hope for. Some doors would erase the memory of anyone who used them without intoning the proper spell.

And whether such brutal fates awaited them or not, the goblins' cruelty was a matter of some renown...

"....."

High Elf Archer glanced back over her shoulder. Noble Fencer was staring vacantly into space.

Is she really okay?

No, of course she wasn't okay. High Elf Archer knew she couldn't imagine what awful things that girl had been through. It was a miracle she had kept her sanity.

Ahh, no time for that now. Concentrate, concentrate!

She bit her lip, focusing on her fingers as they checked the keyhole.

After a few minutes, she felt something give, and the lock unlatched with a *clack*.

"...Phew. Got it."

"Good work" were the only words Goblin Slayer said. Even as the elf chuckled and puffed out her chest, he raised up his leg and gave the door a solid kick.

There was no reaction.

"Seems safe enough." Lizard Priest all but slithered his way to the front of the group. Kicking the door open just in case there was anything inside was a tactic as old as time.

"Well, of course it's safe. I checked it, didn't I?"

"You told us yourself that you didn't know what you were doing," Dwarf Shaman growled, following after the triumphant High Elf Archer.

Goblin Slayer, who had continued to watch the hallway after breaking in the door, nodded at Priestess.

"Oh, light," she said. "Coming right up."

"Thank you."

She grabbed a torch out of her bag and lit it as she had done so many times before.

A goblin fortress. Deep at night, a blizzard howling all around; not even the light of the stars reached them. Goblins could see well in the dark, so these conditions didn't bother them, but not so humans. At the very least, they would need fire while they explored the storehouses...

"There, got it."

"....."

Priestess let out a breath, a red flame dancing on the torch in her hand. It wavered as her exhalation passed over it.

Then she turned and walked up to Noble Fencer, who was looking at her intently.

"Hold on to this, okay?"

"Hold on to...what...?"

Noble Fencer was surprised to find herself spoken to; she didn't seem to think Priestess could possibly mean her. But Priestess insisted, calmly and quietly, "The torch. Look after it, okay?"

"....."

Noble Fencer didn't say anything, just stared at the proffered light, but Priestess took her hand and wrapped it around the base of the torch.

Noble Fencer shuddered to see a flame before her very eyes. As she looked around hesitantly, Priestess thought she saw, at the same time, a frightened little girl.

"....."

The young woman opened her mouth; a little sound

escaped her as if she were trying to say something, and then she held the torch with both hands, looking into the flame.

“.....I understand.”

That was all she said, in a whisper, and then she scuttled into the storeroom.

The hallway fell dark once more. Priestess, however, could feel a smile creeping across her face.

Goblin Slayer walked up beside her at his usual, almost violent pace.

“Why did you ask her to hold it?”

“Just...a hunch.”

The question was rather sharp, but Priestess’s answer was gentle. By now she could tell from his voice that he wasn’t angry.

“I thought she must be feeling...well, bored, and I didn’t want that.”

“Is that so?”

I assume you’ve got a plan anyway...

So much Priestess thought but didn’t say.

To be suddenly thrown into somewhere new, scurrying from place to place. To stand around staring vacantly, not sure what you’re supposed to do. That—that was something Priestess understood all too well. She was an orphan who had been raised in the Temple, after all. An abandoned child.

“Didn’t you notice?”

“Notice what?”

“When I gave her that torch, she was a little embarrassed.”

“Is that so...?”

With that mutter, Goblin Slayer and Priestess headed into the storehouse.

A moldy smell made their noses prickle, and dust threatened to make them sneeze. They closed the door behind them. Immediately, Dwarf Shaman jumped toward the hinges, pounding the pins into place.

“Normally, I’d leave it open,” he said with a shrug,

replacing the peg and hammer in his bag. “But we wouldn’t want any nasty little monsters sneaking up behind us, now, would we?”

“Truly spoken, but now if the enemy should appear in front of us, our escape will be blocked behind.”

Someone let up a great guffaw then, but whether it was Lizard Priest or Dwarf Shaman, no one was quite sure.

“Stop it already.” High Elf Archer frowned, but Priestess joined in the chorus of laughter.

Only Goblin Slayer and Noble Fencer were silent. The young woman still held the torch, raising it slowly above her head. Every movement of the flame produced dancing shadows. In the unsteady light, Goblin Slayer examined the equipment in the storehouse.

“For an armory...” As he spoke, he casually reached into a nearby barrel and pulled something out. It was a crude pickax, cheap-looking, covered in mud and rust, obviously well used. A glance also revealed spades scattered about, and other tools good for moving earth. “...there isn’t much in the way of arms or armor.”

“You don’t think they’re just digging holes? They’re goblins, after all.” High Elf Archer sounded totally disinterested. She couldn’t have cared less about arms or armor. Instead, she had her ears up, listening carefully for footsteps from outside.

“Or perhaps they are digging for something, mining.” Lizard Priest reached out, a lazy sweep of his tail stirring the air. He picked up a spear that had fallen carelessly among the pickaxes and said, “If this so-called goblin paladin exists, I assume he has more in mind than simply enlarging his nest.”

“Makes good sense to me,” Dwarf Shaman said, looking around, but he didn’t sound happy about it. The place might have been dirty, but the stonework still boasted the delicate touch of the dwarves; no average person could have imitated it. “This is a dwarven fortress. There must at least

be ore deposits around.”

“But,” Goblin Slayer said, “do goblins know how to forge swords?”

What could they possibly be digging for? Nobody had an answer.

The shadow of the goblin paladin, the enemy whose face they did not yet know, loomed over all of them.

Even Goblin Slayer was at a loss for an answer here. Who else would be able to fathom what he couldn’t?

“Whatever the case...,” Priestess murmured, grasping her sounding staff as if to push back the oppressive atmosphere. When she found she could get those first few words out of her mouth, the courage to continue welled up. “Whatever the case, if these goblins are planning something, we can’t just leave them here.”

Her resolute words produced nods of agreement from the other adventurers.

“We have to do something about these weapons and equipment, too...”

“Ahh, leave that to me,” Lizard Priest said. “I’ve a little spell for moments like these.”

He scattered some dragon fangs and made a strange hand gesture, bringing his palms together.

“Well, t’aint to be helped,” Dwarf Shaman whispered at this. “Mm. You, girl.”

“...! ...?”

Noble Fencer, who had been entirely focused on carrying the torch, jumped and made a half-voiced sound in answer. She looked at Dwarf Shaman’s beard, which he stroked; he gave a small grunt and then indicated the nearby equipment with a jerk of his chin.

“Lend me a hand. We’re gonna bring out some of those weapons.” Then, as if he already knew exactly what he was looking for, Dwarf Shaman reached into the pile of mismatched equipment and pulled out a sword. “Beard-cutter ain’t exactly kind to his toys. And you’ll never get by

with just that dagger."

There was a grunt—from Goblin Slayer, of course. "I believe I use my equipment appropriately."

"Heh-heh!" It would have been possible to take the quiet chuckle for annoyance, but in fact it was just High Elf Archer laughing.

For her part, Noble Fencer took a second to register that she had been asked to help. But when it sank in, she quickly started gathering up equipment. A sword, a spear, a club... This was all goblin equipment. But even so, she was not a large person. She might have been a warrior, but there was a limit to how much she could carry. And on top of that...

"I don't think a goblin chest plate is going to fit you," Dwarf Shaman declared.

Noble Fencer's generous bust was more than could be contained by the found chest armor.

Looking on from one side, High Elf Archer gave a little snort and suggested peevishly, "Just give it a good push, why don't you? Squeeze it in there."

"Y'long-eared lout! A girl with an anvil for a chest might not know it, but armor that doesn't fit is more liability than help!"

Dwarf Shaman ignored High Elf Archer's reply of *Who's an anvil?!*, instead staring at Noble Fencer.

She could use both a blade and magic, and she was wearing light armor that allowed her to make the most of both. At the moment, the only weapon she had was a dagger. Not the sort of thing that would make someone a company's main source of firepower.

"Best start with a sword, then..."

"...!"

Noble Fencer frowned noticeably at this and backed away from Dwarf Shaman.

"Hmm?"

".....I don't....."

Her voice was so soft. Dwarf Shaman looked at her

curiously; she glared at his beard.

“.....I don’t need.....”

“.....”

“...I don’t need...a weapon...!”

Her voice was still quiet, but there was an unmistakable note of anger. Her otherwise expressionless face began to crumple.

“Hmm.” Dwarf Shaman, perhaps a bit taken aback, blinked and fingered his beard. Then he smiled broadly, as if he had just eaten a delicious meal. “I see, I see! So you’re not interested in gear. Excellent! Now *that’s* the beginning of a friendship!”

“.....”

Now it was Noble Fencer’s turn to be lost for words.

As she stood there blinking at him, Dwarf Shaman went on as if it were the most obvious thing in the world: “How are you going to get along, not being able to say the things you want to say? Hmm?

“*At least outerwear, then,*” he muttered, pawing through the contents of the storehouse.

It might have all been goblin light armor there, but it was also mostly stolen. Everything was covered in dirt and grime, but it could all stand up to practical use.

A leather overgarment. Steel-reinforced gloves. Maybe a little something metal to protect the head...

“...? ...?!”

Noble Fencer was totally flummoxed to find herself swept along, Dwarf Shaman equipping her with first one thing and then another. No race could outdo the dwarves when it came to evaluating the quality of weapons and armor.

This, then that, first one thing, then another. Equipment on, equipment off, new equipment, until her head was spinning.

“Hey now, take it easy, okay? Don’t do everything at once...” Priestess offered this half-hearted attempt to save Noble Fencer, but she didn’t sound very hopeful.

She somehow came across like an older sister... Or maybe more precisely, someone who was trying very hard to act like one. She put her hands on her hips and wagged her finger, repeating, "Come on, stop." She was trying to sound severe but not doing a very good job. "You're only causing trouble for her."

"Hrm..." Dwarf Shaman grunted, then looked into Noble Fencer's face. "Am I causing you trouble?"

For a long while, Noble Fencer didn't say anything, trying to look anywhere but at the dwarf. Silence. Then more silence. Then finally: ".....A little."

"See?" Priestess said, trying to conceal a smile.

"Well, goodness gracious, pardon me," Dwarf Shaman said, also trying not to grin. The way his mouth curved up a little anyway was rather charming.

He gathered the equipment together and hefted it on his back quite nimbly despite his small size. Then he glanced at the young woman.

"I'm not done saying my piece yet, though. Beard-cutter there, he's something else, you understand?"

"Not counting his weird streak," High Elf Archer said with a giggle she couldn't hold in. "Orcbolg never says anything but 'Is that so?' and 'That's right' and 'Goblins.'"

She glanced at Goblin Slayer, who was leaning against the wall in a sullen silence, and gave a catlike smile.

Priestess offered another one of her *It's hopeless* looks and said, "He is who he is."

Finally, Goblin Slayer couldn't restrain himself from saying, "Is that so?"

It was no bad thing for a group of adventurers like this, deep in the heart of danger, to find the ability to laugh—even if such was not one of the precepts Goblin Slayer commonly articulated.

If being serious is the way to win, he'll be serious, Priestess thought. *But if it's not, well...it would be better if he could relax a bit...*

"I'm sure milord Goblin Slayer is quite acquainted with his own habits. Now, then." That was Lizard Priest, his hissing breath bringing the impromptu roast to a close at just the right moment. He slapped his tail once on the floor, then looked around at the group. "Is all in readiness?"

"I suppose we can save the gibes for later. All set, Scaly."

"Mm." The lizard nodded somberly, then made his strange hand gesture.

O my forebears who sleep under layers of rock, with all the time that has piled upon you, guide these objects.

No sooner had he spoken than the dragon fangs scattered on the floor began to boil away.

And then, behold: the weapons and equipment began to rust and deteriorate before their very eyes, starting with whatever was exposed to the air.

"W-wow..." Priestess had heard tell of this ability, but it was considered to be an evil miracle and so not often seen. "Is this the Rust miracle...?"

"Ah, you know it?" Lizard Priest seemed both surprised and interested by her question. "Indeed it is. Destroying objects with Weathering takes rather too long."

"I've never actually seen it myself. What about our items?"

"It won't affect us. Though this isn't a prayer I would often call upon in battle."

Priestess felt a rush of relief at that. The thin mail she wore under her vestments was important to her.

I know it's a consumable, but still.

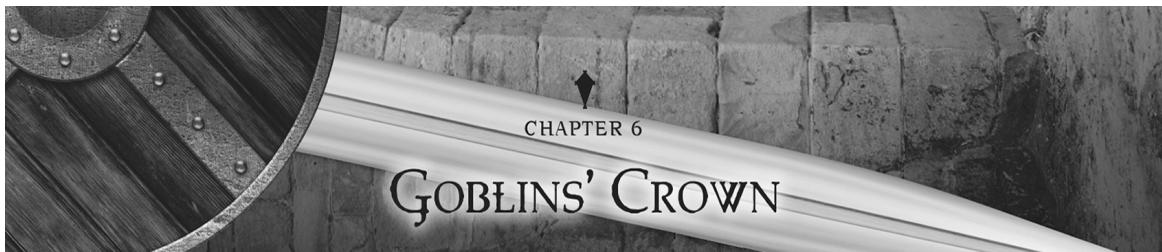
"It takes a good deal of time to prepare, but is useful at times like this," Lizard Priest explained to her, swishing his tail as if he was rather pleased with himself. "Ahem. So we have freed the prisoners down below and destroyed our foes' equipment. I believe everything has gone to plan so far, has it not, milord Goblin Slayer?"

"Yes," Goblin Slayer said, nodding slowly. He took a waterskin out of his item bag, uncorked it, and drank

between the slats of his helmet. "However, we must not let down our guard. There's no telling what may happen."

That, of course, was something all the adventurers here were fully aware of. No one in this world knew whether it was fate or chance that controlled the dice the gods rolled.

The possibility of the unexpected was precisely what made it an adventure.



The creaking and groaning of the rusty horn was violent to the ears but could be heard clearly all throughout the fortress. Given that a goblin was blowing into the pipe as hard as he could, it made sense that the resultant noise would be both loud and hideous. Or perhaps the goblins considered it to sound gallant.

They were dressed in a mismatched array of rags, many of which they had produced by tearing up the clothing they stole from the village women. They carried drums of skin and bone, which made a hollow sound when they beat them.

One after another, the goblins flooded into the central courtyard of the fortress.

“ORARAG!”

“GORRB!!”

“GROOOB!!”

They raised their fists and howled, flecks of dark spittle flying from their lips.

It was obvious enough what their excited voices meant. They were shouting out taunts, or invective, or giving voice to their resentment, jealousy, and greed. The collective hatred was turned upon all those who had what they did not.

To the goblins, it was also as if they were hailing their hero. The one who took their wishes upon himself, the one who slaughtered the foolish humans.

Goblins actually have a strong feeling of solidarity, but at the same time, they hate to take the initiative to do anything themselves. Instead, they leave everything to a chief, or shaman, or lord. That leaves them free to chase

anything that glitters—literally or proverbially—be it food or drink, or women, or gear. Free to drag down those who have what they do not and cut them to pieces.

No goblin wants to die. If his brother dies, he gets angry and feels he must take revenge.

And goblins hold all this at once, feeling no contradiction.
“GORARARARAUB!!!!”

At last, an even louder voice asserted itself, and the goblin behind it appeared, his stride full of menace.

He wore a grimy steel helmet; a patchwork of metal armor covered his body. A crimson cloak—he had torn down a curtain from someplace—served as a further covering. At his hip he carried a shining silver sword so striking that to the goblins, it seemed nearly sacred.

“ORARAG! ORRUG!” The goblin paladin. At his great and somber voice, the goblins knelt as one.

Together, they bowed their heads, and a path opened among them like the parting of a sea. The goblin paladin began to walk among them, regally, his cape fluttering.

The tip of the scabbard in which his silver sword rested scraped along the ground, but he seemed to pay it no mind.

He advanced toward a huge throne, built of junk and corpses. His hideously twisted face seemed to suggest an element of pride. He could almost have looked humorous, like a caricature of a human being—but one infinitely depraved and cruel.

§

“We’ve miscalculated.”

The party had just left the armory. Goblin Slayer was looking out into the central courtyard from the hallway, clicking his tongue and not sounding very happy.

High Elf Archer gave him a quizzical look. “How so? Isn’t that the enemy boss? I could pick him off from here...”

“That you mustn’t do,” Lizard Priest said gently. “That

would leave us with only a headless army of goblins, and there is no telling what they might do." The quick-tempered archer already had a bud-tipped arrow in her bow. "But I believe that is not all, is it, milord Goblin Slayer?"

"No," he said. Then, quietly, he added, "Can you not see it?"

"...They're just goblins, aren't they?"

"That's right."

This caused High Elf Archer to twitch her long ears, perplexed. This wasn't making sense to her, nor was she sure what they had miscalculated. Yes, there had been some hiccups in the plan, but she felt it had gone pretty well overall...

"That goblin is the master of this fortress."

"...?"

"This is a ceremony. They're going to present ranks or awards."

"Oh!" It was not High Elf Archer, but Priestess, who exclaimed. She clapped a hand over her own mouth, then peeked at the courtyard from the hall. Thankfully, none of the goblins seemed to have noticed over the grating sounds their ugly little band was making.

Priestess put a hand to her chest in relief, and then with all seriousness, she gave the answer.

"There's always a priest at ceremonies like this...!"

Indeed. If this ceremony followed typical goblin style, the priest would be called forward.

Whether or not the priest was involved, that was still the goblin paladin before them, the creature who had apparently received a handout from the god of external knowledge.

But as far as that goblin priest went...

".....Oh."

A tiny, shaking voice escaped Noble Fencer's lips. Her lovely face went slightly pale. She clenched her fists, her

arms still wrapped in bandages. What had those hands of hers done? What had she done with them? On a whim? In the caprice of a moment?

Her eyes wavering, she looked from one member of the party to another.

"Well, he's not far away," Dwarf Shaman said as if nothing much were going on. "But he's permanently indisposed." He stroked his beard with one hand, reaching into his bag of catalysts with the other; his expression was seriousness itself. "I suppose this might be a bit of a problem."

No one could say anything in response to his whisper.

They all understood the situation they were in.

Even a cursory glance at the goblins in the courtyard suggested there were more than fifty monsters there. And the adventurers were right there with them. What would happen when the goblins discovered their presence?

Goblin slaying is as old as time; it has been taking place since the world was born. And whenever it does, the goblins have always outnumbered the adventurers.

Those heroes who are unprepared, who challenge the goblins blindly, are killed. All the more so when they try to give battle in the very heart of the nest.

Goblin Slayer was no exception to this rule.

How was this odd adventurer with his strange ways going to make up for the difference in numbers? They had been adventuring together for close to a year. There was no way she wouldn't know.

Then it happened.

"...O-ow...!" Noble Fencer, her hands still clenched, went stiff and grunted in pain.

"Wh-what's wrong?" Priestess approached her almost automatically, checking for injuries, but she saw no obvious wounds. But...

"Hrr-rrr-ghh...gah..."

"Sh-she's so hot...!"

Noble Fencer's skin was hot to the touch, seemingly

almost enough to burn.

"What's going on?" Goblin Slayer asked.

"I—I don't know. But this..."

Remember. Think back. Priestess desperately searched her memory.

There were no external injuries, and it wasn't likely to be poison. Heat in the body. Almost as if a spell had been cast on her.

A spell? No. This was no simple magic. And there were no totems here. A paladin. A cleric.

Divine punishment... A curse. A curse?

"Oh...!"

Priestess looked down at where Noble Fencer's recently shortened hair revealed the nape of her neck. The cruel brand burned into the skin there, the eye of the green moon, was shining brightly, as if aflame.

"It's...!"

"Haah... Hrrrgh... Arrgh..."

Noble Fencer writhed, sinking her teeth into her own arm in hopes of suppressing her groans of pain. Priestess held on to the warrior's burning body for dear life, looking up at Lizard Priest. He was Silver-ranked, the most experienced cleric there. Now he let out a hissing breath.

"A curse from the evil gods! I must dispel it. No, we've no time...!"

They had been careless. They had considered the brand to be nothing more than another example of the goblins' vile cruelty.

Now they understood: it was because of the curse that even a healing miracle had not been able to erase the scar.

"O Earth Mother, abounding in mercy, lay your revered hand upon this child's wounds!"

Even so, there was no time to dawdle. Priestess implored the Earth Mother to give them healing. The merciful goddess brushed the girl's neck with her finger, pitting herself against the curse that resided there. But...

“GORUB?!”
“ORARARAGU?!”

All at once, a hubbub began to spread among the goblins in the courtyard.

The adventurers saw that the ceremony was proceeding apace; now the monsters were only waiting for their priest and his sacrifice.

But he didn't appear. He did not come.

After a moment, the goblin paladin muttered, “ORG,” and sent a lackey scurrying off.

He was no doubt headed for the basement prison. He would find the priest's body, along with the freed prisoners—it was only a matter of time.

“ORARARAGAGA!!” the goblins shouted, the collective noise growing in strength.

The goblin paladin jumped up and howled out what seemed like a bizarre prayer. “IRAGARAU!”

“Hrraaaaaaahhh!” Noble Fencer bellowed, no longer able to fight the pain.

Then everything happened at once.

Looking into the courtyard, Goblin Slayer grabbed his sword. The goblin paladin was looking right at him.

Their eyes met. One gaze hidden by a steel helmet, the other a pair of golden pupils. And then—

“ORAGARAGARAGARA!!!!”

“Get down!”

At the goblin paladin's command, archers turned and let loose a volley of arrows with sickening agility. At the same moment, Goblin Slayer dove to the side, catching the two girls as he went.

“Eek!”
“...?!”

Priestess exclaimed; Noble Fencer made no sound but was obviously startled. Goblin Slayer ignored them, raising his shield.

Thop, thop, thop. A limp sound rang out as the arrows

showered against it. Goblins are not strong creatures to begin with; when they had to fire upward, the fact was only magnified.

Goblin Slayer picked up one of the arrows; he found the head was only loosely attached. And yet, the little monsters were trying to make the arrows work over a long distance.

“A poor imitation.”

A hollow sound of metal accompanied the continuing rain of arrows. Goblin Slayer grunted, throwing away the bolt in his hand as if it interested him not at all. Then he looked back at Priestess and Noble Fencer, keeping his shield up to protect them as he spoke.

“Are you all right?”

“Oh, uh, y-yes. Thank you.”

“It’s no problem.”

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“.....”

Noble Fencer said nothing, averting her eyes from where she lay under Goblin Slayer's chest, but she nodded.

“Good.”

That was enough. He looked next at where their companions were located some distance away.

“What about you?”

“Fine, somehow!” High Elf Archer said.

“In danger of getting crushed, though,” Dwarf Shaman said with a wave.

Lizard Priest had spread-eagled himself and leaned back over the elf and the dwarf to cover them.

“Well, now, this has become a fine thing, hasn't it?” he said, narrowing his eyes happily despite the hail of arrows around him.

To the lizardmen, such crises were considered trials, and trials were to be undertaken with joy.

“We'll split into two groups,” Goblin Slayer said.

“Excellent idea,” Lizard Priest said quickly. “Three and three: a warrior, a spell caster, and a priestess. Then a priest, a ranger, and a spell caster. Yes?”

“That's fine.”

“Which shall be the bait?”

“I'll do it,” Goblin Slayer said. “A tank is most suited to that job.”

“And my physical strength most appropriate for carrying the former prisoners out of the basement. Understood!”

“Good.”

Their quick, quiet conference over, the strategy was set. There was no one who could best Goblin Slayer at slaying goblins. Nor could any race outdo the lizards when it came to the arts of war.

“Then let us put this plan into motion. Mistress ranger, master spell caster—will you be able to come with me?”

“Yeah, sure,” High Elf Archer said. “But—gosh! Look at the form they use shooting those arrows! It just ticks me off!”

"Save it," Dwarf Shaman advised her. Then the three of them began to creep down the hallway, using Lizard Priest and his mighty scales as a shield.

Goblin Slayer nodded. Now all he had to do was make himself noticeable.

"All right. Let's go."

"Oh—yes...!"

"...!"

But Noble Fencer stood silently, not moving. Or rather, she couldn't move.

The pain was part of it, the feeling that her neck was burning. She was curled up and sniffling quietly.

But that wasn't all of it. The fingernails of the fists she had closed so tightly had broken through her bandages, and now blood was flowing.

"You... You mustn't do that, okay?" Priestess approached, gently placing her hand over the fencer's. The two willowy, delicate hands went together naturally, entwined with each other.

Noble Fencer shook slightly.

".....I...."

The thinnest of voices escaped her.

"...know... I.....know that. I kn.....ow."

She shook her head, waves rippling through her honey-colored hair, as if to drive something away.

"But....." She couldn't seem to get out more than that; the rest wouldn't come. "...But...!"

Then the dam broke, words and tears spilling out in equal measure.

The regret. The regret. The pain. The sadness. Why had it all happened to her? It wasn't...

It wasn't supposed to be like this. All of them—impulsive. Laughing at her.

Making fun. And yet... She was wretched. Unable to do anything. Pathetic.

It was her fault again. Her fault that things...had ended

like this.

The sword. She had to get it back. She had to. Give it back. Give it back.

I want to go home.

Father... Mother...

"I can't... I can't stand this anymore...!"

"..."

Goblin Slayer and Priestess were silent. The string of words made scant sense to them.

Noble Fencer was sniffling and snuffling like a child coming down from a temper tantrum. Goblin Slayer listened carefully as she desperately strung words together. From inside his metal helmet, he looked intently at her tearful, snotty face.

And then he thought:

Out of all that the goblins steal, how much can really be gotten back?

"Is that so?" he said then. "I understand."

"...Huh?"

Noble Fencer looked up at him, uncomprehending. She looked at Priestess, beside her.

"...Gosh," Priestess said. "You really are hopeless, aren't you?" *Sigh.* She didn't rise from where she crouched between Goblin Slayer and Noble Fencer.

"—is what I cannot say."

Now it came out. Again. But he did understand, didn't he?

"Goblin Slayer, sir, I've told you, you can't just answer everything with, 'Is that so?'!"

"Is that so?"

"See? You did it again."

".....Is that so...?"

Priestess's smile was like a blooming flower; *he* pointedly averted his gaze.

"I will get back your sword." Then he stood up, his shield still at the ready. The storm of arrows continued to bounce

off it. "And I will kill that goblin paladin. Along with the other goblins."

He drew the sword at his hip. It was a strange length. "I don't mean one or two of them. I don't mean an entire nest. I don't mean even this entire fortress."

The grimy helmet. The cheap-looking armor. The adventurer who wore them.

"I will slay all the goblins."

So do not cry.

At these words from Goblin Slayer, Noble Fencer sniffed mightily, then gave a small nod.

§

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"O Earth Mother, abounding in mercy, grant your sacred light to we who are lost in darkness!"

That great light broke upon the goblins like the dawning of the sun.

It was Holy Light, granted by Priestess's soul-enervating prayer.

At this distance, it wouldn't be enough to blind the targets, but—

"ORARAGA!"

"GROAAB!!"

—it was more than enough to get the goblins focused on one group of adventurers while another snuck into the fortress.

The goblin paladin spat out an order, along with several dark flecks of spittle, and the goblins began to move. The arrows continued to come down, while a unit of goblins marched out of the courtyard. Presumably, the plan was to pin down the enemy with arrows while advancing their own troops. That much was clear enough.

"While we have their sacrifice, however, they can't afford to act too aggressively," Goblin Slayer said, holding up his round shield to protect the young woman behind him from the incoming bolts.

The arrows bounced off the shield and scattered on the ground nearby. He stepped on and destroyed them mercilessly.

"It feels good to be the one with the hostage for once."

Goblin Slayer glanced back at Priestess and Noble Fencer, then turned to securing a path.

"Here we go. Keep low."

"Oh—yes, sir! Should I use Protection...?"

"No," Goblin Slayer said. "Save it."

Priestess had only one miracle left. And it never paid to misjudge when one should use one's spells or miracles.

Priestess nodded obediently, but her smile was somehow

mischievous. "All right," she said, then, after a beat: "But if it gets dangerous, I'm using it."

"I'll trust your judgment."

The words set her heart dancing: *He trusts my judgment!*

It made her so happy to hear that one word, *trust*, from Goblin Slayer.

"Yes, sir!" she said earnestly. Goblin Slayer nodded at her, then looked at Noble Fencer.

"Can you run?"

".....Probably." It was the honest answer. The girl was rubbing at the reddened corners of her eyes. All the emotions she had been holding back had come bursting out, and maybe she was feeling differently now. Her expression was still transparently frozen, but now the glass beads of her eyes had a light in them.

"All right." Goblin Slayer pulled a torch out of his bag, struck a flint, and lit it. He thrust it at Noble Fencer. She took it in a firm grip, blinking at the bright flame.

"You're our rear guard. Keep us safe."

"....Okay." She nodded with a serious expression. Something soft embraced her left hand. She looked up in surprise, to see—

"It's going to be fine."

—Priestess, smiling like an open flower in front of her.

"We've come this far. Do you think we're going to let ourselves be defeated now?"

"...Mm."

Noble Fencer squeezed Priestess's hand. Then they set off running, and the battle began.

Whether or not the enemy realized it, the arrowheads on all the goblins' arrows were loose. Nor were the tips covered in poison. Maybe this was an effect of the earlier battle, or perhaps they just held a grudge. But in Goblin Slayer's opinion, they were simply trying to ape him, and doing a poor job of it.

The device of the loose arrowheads caused the arrows to

shake, lowering their accuracy. What were the goblins thinking, trying to fire such bolts from a distance? Long-range shooting was already difficult for goblins, weak as they were. Now they were using missiles whose tips would break off when they hit anything. An unprepared amateur might be vulnerable to such tactics, but the arrows would hardly even damage anyone with halfway decent armor.

Still, it was convenient for him. The goal of his group was to buy time. To be the bait. They were supporting their allies. Every goblin they could get to pay attention to them was one step closer to victory.

That, of course, was assuming that Lizard Priest and the others could pull off their part of the plan.

“This is going to get harder and harder to handle alone.”

“Goblin Slayer, sir! They’re coming! Six—no, seven!”

Priestess sounded a warning as if to confirm the mutter that escaped him.

Ahead of them: a group of goblins was running along the fortress walls toward them, golden eyes glittering in the dark. They held clubs and spears and axes with which to beat the adventurers, trample them, tear them apart, violate them.

“Hmph.”

What Goblin Slayer did was simple.

He drew his sword as he ran, then flung it.

“GAROAB?! ”

One goblin suddenly found himself with a sword through his neck; he clutched his throat as if drowning as he tumbled from the battlements, disappearing into the blackness.

The remaining goblins were not, of course, especially intimidated by this.

Look. That stupid adventurer just threw away his weapon. Attack! Kill! Tear them to pieces!

But that was their mistake.

“First, one. Next, two.”

“GARARA?!”

The shield in his left hand came up, shattering the skull of the goblin in front. The shield’s honed edge was a weapon in itself, and it did its job brilliantly.

Warding off the gruesome spray of his enemy’s blood, Goblin Slayer picked up the creature’s stone ax.

“Three!”

So long as goblins attacked him, Goblin Slayer would not be without a weapon.

The merciless stone ax came flying at the heads of the third and fourth creatures, splitting them open just like their companion earlier.

“ORAG?!”

A fourth. A fifth. A sixth. Trading one weapon for another and then another, he slaughtered goblins with each breath.

The goblins were unable to use their numbers to their advantage on the narrow battlements, something the little monsters had yet to understand.

The adventurers pushed ahead against the goblins, who crashed against them like a hideous tide.

Of course, Goblin Slayer didn’t deal with them all single-handedly.

“GRARAB!”

One creature used its small size to dodge to one side, making for the women.

“Take *this!*”

“GARO?!”

But Priestess rebuffed him firmly with a swing of her sounding staff. The damage it did was minimal, but it was more than enough to stun him.

“Why, *youuu!*”

“ORARAG?!”

And a stunned goblin was easy prey for Noble Fencer. She swung the torch like a burning club and sent the creature tumbling from the walls.

Her shoulders heaved, but her eyes were looking into the

darkness.

“They’re coming from behind, too!”

“How many?”

“...I’m not sure.” She bit her lip. “But it’s a lot!”

“All right.”

Goblin Slayer casually withdrew a bottle from his bag and launched it behind him. It flew over Priestess’s and Noble Fencer’s heads with the sound of a passing breeze, landing directly in front of the oncoming goblins.

There was a clatter as the ceramic jar broke; the viscous liquid inside went everywhere. Noble Fencer had probably never seen or heard of this liquid, but Priestess remembered it.

It had many names: Medea’s Oil, petroleum...and gasoline.

“GARARARA?!”

“ORAG?!”

There were other ways to kill an enemy besides personally cutting them down. The goblins slipped and slid on the slick stuff, falling from the ramparts. With all the creatures shoved together on the top of the wall, this was only to be expected.

Still, goblins would be goblins. They trampled over their fallen comrades and got past the gasoline, throwing themselves at the adventurers even if their numbers had been somewhat reduced.

“GRARAM!”

“...Hi-yaah!”

Noble Fencer swung at them energetically. The torch looked like a great red brush, showering sparks as she painted the night with it.

One goblin took a blow and fell off the wall. The second came leaping at her. She met it with a strike from the torch. The third was already upon her, threatening to sneak past to one side.

“Leave him to me...!”

It was Priestess. Noble Fencer had no time to answer as she dealt with the fourth goblin, whom she beat repeatedly until he stopped moving.

Yes, but now the fifth, and the sixth were—

I can't keep up...!

Her arm as she wielded the torch grew heavy, her movement slow; her breath became strained and her vision clouded.

She could hear the sound of her own breathing, her own blood pulsing. There was a ringing in her ears, making it hard to hear.

Noble Fencer glanced over her shoulder, seeking help. But Priestess was whipping her sounding staff around as fast as she could, trying to drive back the mass of oncoming creatures.

“Curse you...!” she was saying. “There’s...always so many of them...!”

Goblin Slayer was just beyond her, and it would be no use hoping for help from him.

Noble Fencer could feel rancid goblin breath on her pale cheek; they were getting very close.

“Oh...”

The humiliation and hopelessness she had experienced on the snowy mountain returned vividly to her memory. The awful reek of the goblins. The implacable hands. The unrelenting violence and cruel greed. The simpleminded grins.

The thought made her body go stiff, her throat constricting with terror. Strength came into her hands.

But in her left hand was an unmistakable warmth; in her right, an unremitting light burned.

A scene flashed before her eyes, of Goblin Slayer in the basement prison, fighting his fight.

“...Ah...ahhhh!”

There was an instant where her body moved faster than thought, flinging the torch at the goblins.

“GAROARAARA?!”

Unfortunately—or perhaps somewhat fortunately?—her target was one of the goblins who had already crossed the gasoline. Flame billowed across his skin instantaneously, and he fell off the battlements still writhing in agony.

“GROOOB!! GRAAB!!”

Always, however, goblins trust to their numbers. Another simply surged forward and filled the gap.

“Hrrraah...!”

Noble Fencer brought her fist around in a backhand. In her hand she had concealed the aluminum dagger, with which she stabbed the creature.

“GAROARAO?!”

“D-damn you...!”

The dagger buried under the monster’s clavicle was enough to end his life; she kicked the corpse away, pulled out her blade, and looked up again.

Suddenly, she found the tide had broken. This was the pause, the few precious seconds before the next wave rolled in. Noble Fencer inhaled deeply, steadying her breathing.

She was sure she could never have done this a few minutes ago. Spurred on by anger, weapon in hand, throwing herself at the horde of goblins without a thought for either the past or the future. And...

“*Huff...puff...huff...*”

But then there was Priestess. Even as she gulped air, she refused to let go of Noble Fencer’s hand. Her fingers were slim and pretty, and yet—and yet, warm.

“.....”

Noble Fencer regarded the hand silently. The urge to wade in among the goblins was not enough to make her extricate herself from Priestess’s grip. After all, Goblin Slayer, who had rescued Noble Fencer, had entrusted her to Priestess.

“Thirteen... Well done.”

The man himself spoke without so much as a glance in

her direction and tossed her a new torch. She just managed to catch it, using the moment's peace between onslights of goblins to light the thing and get a good grip on it.

She looked briefly at Priestess's face; sweat was running down her forehead and her features were stiff with nervousness, but still she gave Noble Fencer a smile. Noble Fencer reflected that she probably looked much the same herself.

She knew that, for better and for worse, people could change dramatically in the space of a single moment.

§

"How's it looking up top?"

High Elf Archer casually shot another goblin, then glanced back at her friends.

There were goblins inside the fortress. Not as many as on the walls, but enough to make combat unavoidable. The sounds of fighting reaching the elf's ears intensified, but she took comfort in the fact that she didn't hear any human screams.

"Ah-ha! You're worried about Beard-cutter, aren't you, Long-Ears?"

Dwarf Shaman chuckled, pulling out a wineskin and taking a swig. With his lips wetted, he wiped a few drops away and smirked at his companion. "Wish you were up there yourself, do you?"

"Not especially. I'm not worried about Orcbolg at all." She sniffed as if the subject bored her, then drew another arrow from her quiver. "It's the other two I'm concerned about."

"Concerned the new girl is going to take him from you is what you are! Awfully childish."

"That's *not* what I'm worried about!" Her ears stood up straight and she glared at the dwarf. Perhaps she realized she had come on a little strong, because her next words were much more gentle, almost shy. "...They're my friends. Is

it wrong to worry about them?"

"Ain't nothing wrong with it."

"Huh?" High Elf Archer blinked, taken aback to hear the dwarf agree with her so readily.

"You're an elf. A big, important friend!"

So he was just teasing her after all. But then, he was praising her, too, or so it seemed. She wanted to get angry but couldn't quite bring herself to do it. And yet, she couldn't just roll over and take this, either. She settled for a growl and a glare in the dwarf's direction, but he ignored her and took another mouthful of wine.

"Ha-ha-ha! Now, if milord Goblin Slayer were here, there would be no need to argue." Lizard Priest watched the two of them with a jolly expression, his tongue slipping out of his mouth with a hiss.

He was actually the youngest among the three of them, but he never tired of watching the elf, who acted so much younger than she was.

"Now, then. It will avail us nothing to chat and chatter here. How much farther?"

"Not far to the room we're looking for," Dwarf Shaman said, wiping his beard with a gauntleted hand. He put the cap back on the wineskin and tapped on the wall. "Frankly, it's going to be a bigger job getting back to the prison once we're done there."

"Oh," said High Elf Archer, sensing an opening, "I thought dwarves were as brave as they were fat. Not so?"

"Watch it." Dwarf Shaman's movements were somber, his shake of his head serious. "I look as good as I do *because* I'm so brave. Unlike you. I can hear your knees knocking from here!"

"Why, you...! Dwarf! Wine barrel!"

"What's that, anvil?"

"Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Now, of course, the three of them might be bantering, but they weren't standing around wasting time. Fewer enemies

for them meant more were assaulting their friends. They had no time, and half their usual fighting strength. A single wrong move born of panic could render everything for naught.

The fact they could be so alert and yet make no mistake was testament to who they were. It was why they had no time for unnecessary anxiety. Yes, sometimes it was possible to succeed despite nervousness. But it was crucial to keep chatting, stay relaxed, do the job as if it were nothing out of the ordinary.

In fact, not a single goblin they'd encountered had escaped. Between High Elf Archer's arrows and Lizard Priest's claws and fangs and tail, none of their enemies were breathing any longer. On top of that, Dwarf Shaman's guidance was true; he found them the shortest, quickest routes.

"This'll be it." They had arrived at another great, thick dwarven door. Dwarf Shaman was sniffing the air as if checking something, then he nodded and turned back to High Elf Archer. "All right, switch off."

"Yeah, sure. Let me at it." She tapped him on the shoulder and switched places, then pressed herself up against the door. She took out her needle-branch and quickly checked the keyhole, searched for traps, and set about the business of picking the lock.

As she did so, Dwarf Shaman and Lizard Priest busied themselves keeping an eye out for enemies. Each of them was holding his favorite weapon—a Swordclaw for one, a sling for the other—and scanning the area vigilantly.

There was no sign of goblins yet. They could be grateful for the way the dice were falling.

"Hey," High Elf Archer said with a twitch of her ears. She was working her needle industriously, finally producing a *click* from the lock. "Are you sure this is gonna work? Not that I'm doubting you, but it's already failed once..."

"Got to admit, I've been worried about the same thing.

What do you say, Scaly?"

"One failure does not mean the plan has no merit." Lizard Priest stepped forward as High Elf Archer slid nimbly back from the door. Anyone would be pleased to have such a stalwart companion as Lizard Priest among them, especially when assaulting a fortress full of goblins.

"It has always been the way of those attacking castles to flood the place, but there is another possibility." He kicked the door in and looked around, then opened his jaws and smiled like a naga. A nearby barrel was filled to the brim with something—chunks of what appeared to be smashed-together ants.

"And that is to starve the enemy."

§

Fwoosh. It was at that moment that a gout of flame went up from one corner of the ruined castle.

"ORARAGA?!"

"GROAB!!"

Even the cruel goblins, loyal chiefly to their own greed, were surprised at this, making sounds of confusion.

The deathmatch with the second wave was over; they were on to the third wave now. Around them, fifteen or sixteen goblins stopped cold as they saw their provisions go up in flames.

"Good."

Goblin Slayer was not one to waste such an opportunity. He was already diving out of the way along the castle wall, barking orders. "The torch—throw it forward! Now!"

Noble Fencer gripped the torch that was her weapon, looking at the ground for just an instant. And then, this time decisively rather than reactively, she flung the little handheld flame.

By now, even she knew what she was aiming at. The torch fell in an arc, and tongues of flame began licking up along

the path. The gasoline Goblin Slayer had thrown down earlier became a wall of flame, blocking the goblins entirely.

“GROAA?!”

One unfortunate creature caught in the blast was turned into a living torch; he thrashed on the ground for a moment before lying still.

Confronted with his terrible death, the goblins were not about to try to jump through the flames, however angry they might be. Some stories tell of courage that fears not even death—but this is the furthest thing from the mind of goblins.

“Twenty-nine. It’s about time.” Goblin Slayer threw away his brain-smeared club and took the sword from the goblin corpse at his feet. He gripped it, tried a few moves, then nodded. “We withdraw. Get ready to—”

“Goblin Slayer, sir!” Priestess shouted a warning. Without it, his adventure would likely have ended there. He whipped the sword back instinctively, and it went flying out of his hands in a shower of sparks. A white line traced itself across his sternum, between his helmet and his armor.

“Damn...!” Goblin Slayer jumped back instantaneously; there was a flash of aluminum in front of him. It was no enchanted sword, no sacred blade. And yet, it would not have been out of place in the hand of a hero.

“GRAAORRRN...!”

A goblin stood there, smoke rising from his armor and flames from his eyes. He had jumped through the wall of fire; he was like a messenger of the gods, sent to bring low his enemies on behalf of his brothers. With his aluminum sword in his right hand and a teardrop-shaped shield in his left, he looked like a caricature of a holy warrior.

The goblin paladin.

“You’re late,” Goblin Slayer said calmly. He leveled his sword, which had been reduced to the length of a dagger. It was his usual stance: shield high, hips low, wrist rotating until his sword was pointed at his enemy. “But I expected

you eventually.”

“GAROAROB...!” The goblin paladin moved his equipment-laden hands in strange gestures, making some unknown sign. It was easy enough to infer that he was making a show of praise to the Outer God, who resided upon the green moon.

“...Haa...ahh...!” When Noble Fencer realized who he was, a strangled scream slipped out of her. The brand on her neck grew as hot as burning. The sign of the Outer God started to pulse. It had begun to swell—as if it might burst at any moment...

With that image in her mind, her knees began to shake. And yet she never took her eyes off one thing—the silver sword that the goblin held.

That's mine. Mine... It was stolen from me...

And it was pointed at her—she was surprised to find herself using this word—comrades.

“Ahh...n-n-no...!”

A sound of footsteps came closer. The goblins, heartened by the appearance of their champion, had surrounded the walls as they closed in.

There was no escape. Had they cornered the paladin or been cornered by him? Would it all end here?

What should I do? What should I—?

“Hurry.” A calm, almost mechanical voice cut through her confusion. “I'll buy you time.”

“Yes, sir!” Priestess replied immediately in a ringing tone.

Noble Fencer bit her lip. A dribble of blood came from her nape; she could feel it running down her neck.

But she was all right. She was sure of it. She would *make* herself all right.

“...Right.”

The actions the two girls took next were diametrically opposed.

Words of true power overflowed from Noble Fencer's

mouth. "*Tonitrus...oriens...!* Thunder...rise!"

Priestess, for her part, prayed to the goddess, but did not invoke a miracle: "O Earth Mother, abounding in mercy. May your protection be upon us..."

This was because both of them had been told by Goblin Slayer that he would trust them.

Trust one to protect Priestess. Trust the other to use Protection at the right time.

"IRARAGARU!!"

"...Hrk!"

The goblin paladin sprang into action, babbling a prayer to his bizarre gods. The blow of his sword was swift and sharp, easily knocking away the shield Goblin Slayer had brought up to meet it.

Smite human!

Goblins as a whole tend to be of small stature. Hobgoblins excepted, they lack physical strength. The aluminum sword, however, helped make up for that. In the hand of this creature, Goblin Slayer saw now, it was a thing to be wary of. If it was enhanced by miracles from the Outer God, typical armor might well be useless against it.

Enchanted armor might be a different matter, but Goblin Slayer disliked such things. The very situation he was in made it clear what could happen if such items fell into the hands of the enemy.

"Hmph."

Goblin Slayer's sword work was nonchalant but masterful. Locking blades would not be the key here; he could tell that would be pointless. He would have to strike his opponent's sword from above, forcing it down, and then use his foreshortened blade to stab at any opening.

It was not very adventurer-esque, a technique more suited to a rough and deadly duel on the outskirts of some little town. He didn't expect the goblin paladin, who had most likely learned his swordcraft by studying adventurers, to be able to respond.

Even for Goblin Slayer, though, this opponent was too dangerous to simply try to force his way in. He took a blow with his shield, jumping far back, then brought his sword to bear, the opponent's weapons striking out. He pushed the sword down, leaped forward strongly, letting the momentum carry him into the thrust, stabbing.

The difference in body size, in physical power and equipment, strategy, and experience, put a decisive end to the exchange.

But not the battle. That would be decided by something entirely different: two delicate young women against fifteen incoming goblins.

One look at the monsters' cruel smiles made plain the greed, the fantasies, in those little brains.

"Heh-heh."

And yet, despite that, despite all that was going on around her, Priestess had a little smile on her face.

The man who had her back. The one who had entrusted his back to her: she knew him, and he never did his most serious fighting in situations like this. Nor had he ever had her use her miracles at moments like these.

So now was not the time. The moment for Protection would come, but this wasn't it.

Which meant that what she needed to do right now was come up with a plan of escape just as quickly as she could...

She looked quickly through her equipment and took out a particular item, as they'd discussed beforehand. Beside her...

"...*lacta!* and fall!"

...the Lightning spell was completed.

It drew a beeline directly from Noble Fencer's outstretched palm to... Well, one would expect the goblin paladin, wouldn't one?

"AGARARABA?!"

"GORRRBB?!"

But no. Her attack struck the oncoming horde.

“Ee—yaaaahhh!”

In that instant, the battlefield went white. There was a tremendous noise of rushing air, such that one might imagine this was what the howl of a Thunder Drake sounded like, and then the lightning came crashing down.

The goblins scourged by the flash swelled up and exploded, screaming.

To use a powerful spell against close-packed enemies was a standard tactic. White smoke, carrying the acrid stench of cooked flesh, rose up, mingling with the smoke from the fire. Noble Fencer couldn't resist a passing thought: that this place was hell embodied.

“...Take that...!”

The smile on her face was an unsteady one, an attempt to look strong, to be sure; but there was no question, the girls had done it. Priestess brushed a hand across her sooty, sweaty face and shouted, “Goblin Slayer, sir! It's okay!”

“...!”

Goblin Slayer's reaction was immediate. He spun the broken sword around in his hand so that he held it in a reverse grip, then without a moment's hesitation, he flung it at the goblin paladin.

“GARARAI!!”

Believing this to be just a too-clever little trick, the paladin raised his shield and deflected the blade. But he also blocked his own line of sight.

It was just an instant. But it was all Goblin Slayer needed.

“Hwah?!”

“...Ah!”

The two young women cried out: they suddenly found themselves held aloft, one under each of Goblin Slayer's arms as he jumped gracefully off the battlements.

It was just before dawn; a gentle light was beginning to spread across the land. They floated through space.

A biting cold wind rushed across the girls' skin, sharp as a knife.

Then the sense of floating, of falling down, was arrested as abruptly as if they had hit the ground.

But they hadn't. Goblin Slayer's hand gripped something firmly.

The Adventurer's Toolkit.

There was the slightest sound of heightened breathing from inside the steel helmet. Goblin Slayer, it seemed, had an uncharacteristic smile on his face. "Never leave home without it,' they say..."

The hook-and-rope.

Something Priestess—an Obsidian rank, just one step up the adventuring ladder—carried religiously. The hook was buried firmly in the fortress wall, the rope hanging down to the outside; what better escape route could there be?

"IGARARAROB!!"

They looked up to find the goblin paladin leaning out over the wall, bellowing, his face twisted in anger.

Goblins lived primarily underground. He had, they presumed, never before seen someone escape by jumping from a high place.

The monsters couldn't counterattack immediately, but their nasty intelligence was more than enough to set them straight to work dislodging the hook.

Not that Goblin Slayer would let them, of course. With Priestess and Noble Fencer clinging to him, one to each side, he braced his feet against the wall and began his descent in a series of great jumps. His movements were quick and sure, obviously the product of focused training.

"A-aren't we heavy...?" Priestess asked.

"A little."

The question had just slipped out of her, and she frowned a bit at the answer. She blushed and felt a touch of anger at him. It was only natural that a girl her age should shoot back at him: "You're supposed to say, 'No, you're perfectly light'!"

"Is that so?"

"It is!"

“I see.”

Goblin Slayer nodded, although chances were slim that he really understood what she was upset about.

At almost the same moment as Goblin Slayer put his feet on the snowy ground, the rope was severed, falling down after them. He collected it and wrapped it around his shoulder.

“I’ll pay you back later.” It was an odd moment to think of such social niceties, but so characteristic that even Noble Fencer felt a slight smile coming to her face.

But this wasn’t over yet.

“IGURARARARABORR!!”

The goblin paladin, mad with rage, let out a yell that echoed around the mountain, knocking snow from the ramparts. With many a creak and clatter, the great main gate began to open.

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They had to move quickly, or they would find themselves right back where they had begun.

"...Where are the others?" Noble Fencer asked.

"They'll be here soon."

And so they were. There was a crunching noise as the snow-covered ground began to rise up, then the rest of the party popped out from beneath the earth.

"Phew! Ahhh! I'm going to be well and truly tired of goblin tunnels when this is over!" exclaimed Dwarf Shaman, crawling out of the hole like a mole.

"Up you get," he said, reaching back down into the tunnel and taking someone's hand. With no small display of delicacy, he helped High Elf Archer to the surface.

"You're not kidding," she said, dusting herself off and frowning. "I can't believe you dwarves can live underground. Are you *sure* you guys aren't related to goblins?"

"Pick up those long ears and listen to me, you two-thousand-year-old anvil. There are things you can joke about, and things you can't."

"Two-thousand-year-old *what*? Are you looking to start a war, little man?"

And they were off and arguing. It was just their usual banter, but it had started so suddenly that Noble Fencer was completely lost.

"...Er. Ahem..."

"All according to plan," Goblin Slayer said.

"Just so!" a scaly head said, popping up out of the ground. He looked rather monstrous but crawled out easily. "Worry not. Sad their state may appear, but they are unharmed."

As intimidating as he looked, Lizard Priest also seemed happy. Two wasted prisoners hung under each of his arms, four in total. He had physical strength enough to move effortlessly despite carrying them all, and the first aid that had been administered to the women was exemplary as well. It appeared that, indeed, there was no need to fear for their lives.

"Thank goodness..." Priestess let out a relieved breath, tears springing to her eyes. "I was worried about all of you. Are you hurt?"

"Not a scratch!" High Elf Archer said, briefly interrupting her argument with Dwarf Shaman. She puffed out her chest proudly. "What about you? You didn't suffer, did you? I mean, at the hands of Orcbolg..."

"Oh... Ha-ha-ha-ha. No. We're all right. No trouble at all."

"Well." High Elf Archer gave a satisfied nod to see Priestess's brave smile. Then she looked at Goblin Slayer and finally at Noble Fencer. The battle was over; the girl was covered in blood and dust, yet she looked back at the ranger with eyes that shone with light.

The elf gave a slow flip of her ears, then smiled like a cat.

"You did it, huh?"

She bumped Noble Fencer on the shoulder with her fist. The girl put her hand to the spot, blinking. Then she looked down, as if to hide the tears in her eyes, and said simply, "Yes."

"Well, you can see this is none of it any trouble for us," Dwarf Shaman said, stroking his beard proudly and chuckling.

And in fact, that was the truth.

The Tunnel spell might have seemed only a way of moving rocks and dirt, but without it, they could not have saved the prisoners. Nor could they have done it without Lizard Priest's strength to carry the girls out. Lacking High Elf Archer's sharp senses, they might have had to fight many more goblins.

They had stolen the goblins' weapons, destroyed their provisions, saved the prisoners, and then taken on the fortress's monstrous inhabitants. Goblin Slayer could only imagine how much time and trouble it would have demanded alone.

"Ahem, well then, Beard-cutter," Dwarf Shaman said, squinting. "What happened to your sword?"

“I threw it.”

The blunt response elicited a smile and a “That’s what I thought” from the dwarf. “Well, pick whichever one you like. They’re all goblin stuff, but that ought to suit you.”

“Thank you, that helps. Although I will probably just throw it away again.”

“Ahh, don’t worry about it!”

Just salvage anyway. He held out a bundle of swords, the weapons they had stolen from the armory earlier.

So the goblins had stolen them and kept them for a while —only to have adventurers steal them back. Goblin Slayer found it rather an odd thought. He picked the weapon whose blade was the most familiar length to him. He slid it into his scabbard without hesitation. There was no question he felt a bit off without arms.

“So all we’ve got left to do is get that girl’s sword back, is it?” Dwarf Shaman said.

“Right.” Goblin Slayer pulled a jar from his item pouch: a stamina potion.

He popped the cork and drank it in a single swallow. The warmth that spread through his body felt good.

He had saved this item, something Guild Girl had given him before he left, for a special moment.

Goblin Slayer looked at his companions: At Priestess, the girl who had faith in him. At High Elf Archer, who stuck with him through thick and thin. At Dwarf Shaman, who could be relied upon in the most dire circumstances. At Lizard Priest, to whom he entrusted his safety in battle. And at Noble Fencer, who had given her all to persevere until this moment.

Each of them was covered in mud and blood and ash, but here they were.

Then he looked to the horizon. The frontier town was away south. Cow Girl was there, waiting for him to come home. Guild Girl was there.

There were more and more things in his life that he simply

couldn't do alone.

This thought crossed his mind, followed soon after by the conclusion that this was, most probably, fine by him.

In that case, there was only one thing to do.

The same thing he always did.

"We're going to slay all the goblins."

§

Goblins have no concept of industry, of creating things with their own hands. Added to that, they had lost dozens of their brothers in this most recent battle. They would have to avoid being depleted any further, save up supplies.

To fill out their ranks, however, they would need wombs. Wombs and food.

In order to capture females and steal provisions, they would have to attack a village.

And in order to attack a village, they would have to gather their fighting strength, maintain it, move it, and strike at the right moment.

All these things were stolen. Their women were kidnapped, their weapons purloined, their food taken by force.

We can't do anything—we can do nothing! This makes no sense. We are the ones who steal; they are the ones who are stolen from.

This? This makes me no different from the others.

Adventurers burst into my nest and take what is mine—that makes me nothing but...nothing but a goblin!

"GOURRR..."

The goblin paladin, much more intelligent than any of his comrades, could tell that everything was over. With things as they were, the surviving goblins could hardly be expected to continue to obey him.

Goblins had a strong sense of camaraderie, but what bound them together was greed. They killed those they

hated, raped them, stole from them, humiliated them in the most awful ways. What else would a goblin do?

Now there was no way forward; the goblin paladin's plans lay in ruins.

In that case, there was only one thing to do.

The same thing he always did.

Attack the adventurers. Kill the men, capture the women. Then he would chain them up in his dungeon, feed them the flesh of their own comrades, and force them to bear children until their hearts broke and they died.

Goblins did not understand that they might face reprisal for stealing, might be paid back. They only understood that they had been victimized and would have their revenge.

“IRAGARARARARA!!”

Thus, all that followed was a burst of rage.

§

The light of dawn fell on the burning fortress, a silvery sheen that glinted off the mountain upon whose slopes all this happened.

The gleam of the sun and the summit together fell upon the adventurers as they ran along. Even so much as a slip in the snow would have been fatal. Because, as it happened, they were being pursued by a group of crazed goblins hell-bent on killing them.

“IGARARARARAU!” The goblin paladin raised his aluminum sword high, howling a prayer.

“GROAAAB!!” The goblins behind him shouted in response, shaking their weapons and rushing forward. Their eyes were burning, and dirty saliva dripped down from their mouths.

Every shred of rationality was gone now, if indeed they had ever had any.

Lunacy: it was a miracle of battle granted by the god of external knowledge.

The goblins who followed the great paladin were caught up in a whirlpool of insanity. They spared no thought for past or future; their only desire at this moment was to rend the adventurers apart, to crush them underfoot.

The goblins, transformed into a holy army, literally knew no fear. Not even when arrows began to rain noiselessly down upon those in the vanguard, felling them. The goblins simply trampled the corpses into the snow, their zeal undiminished.

"This is why I hate goblins. Numbers are the only thing they've got!" High Elf Archer drew a bud-tipped arrow with a delicate movement, letting it loose even as she turned back to quip to her friends. Despite her failure to aim carefully, the arrow couldn't miss its mark.

A skill so sufficiently developed was indistinguishable from magic.

"Then again, I do love these big open spaces for shooting! None of those cramped interiors!"

"Just watch what you wish for..." Dwarf Shaman snapped.

"If you've got breath to talk, then you've got breath to run! Faster!"

"I'm runnin'! Fast as I can!"

The dwarf's stubby legs made him the slowest runner in the party, even when he was going flat out. Then again, the entire party was moving somewhat slower than normal.

"What about you?" Dwarf Shaman asked. "How's that leg holding up?"

"Honestly? It still hurts a bit." Her leg, as slim as a deer's, had been hit with an arrow not that long ago. High Elf Archer squinted one eye shut in distress, then loosed another bolt.

"I aver that at this rate, I do believe they will catch us," Lizard Priest said. His movements were slowed by the cold, and needless to say, he was still hauling the former prisoners. He had summoned a Dragontooth Warrior and entrusted one or two of the girls to it, but it was not much faster than he was.

"The enemy ranks have thinned. I might recommend allowing me to face them alone."

"N-no! You can't!" Priestess, not normally so confrontational, shook her head vigorously. "It's one thing to do something outrageous or unbelievable when it helps you win, but it won't work this time...!"

One wondered if she realized she was all but repeating one of Goblin Slayer's favorite sayings.

A stamina potion helped somewhat, but it could not completely restore physical strength. They had left the village, marched through the snow, spent the entire night assaulting a fortress, and were now engaged in another battle without ever having had the chance to rest. Fatigue dulled the mind, a dull mind led to mistakes, and mistakes, in this case, led to death.

"Gracious... Were it just slightly warmer, I could at least move more effectively."

"No, you mustn't—oh." Priestess recalled something she had in her bag. She dug into her pouch and pulled out a ring. "This is the ring Goblin Slayer gave me, the one that bestows Breathe. It won't help much, but—"

"Anything is more than nothing. I receive it gratefully." Lizard Priest was still running, still carrying the prisoners, but he managed to slip Priestess's ring onto one scaly finger.

The moment he did so, he made an impressed sound; the effect was that immediate and noticeable. It was not, however, enough to significantly change the situation.

What to do now?

Only one of them had large-scale firepower. Noble Fencer allowed the magical power to begin flowing through her.

"I'll use Lightning to—"

"No." Goblin Slayer rejected the plan forthrightly. "There will be a time to use it, but not now."

"...?"

Noble Fencer gave him a questioning look as they ran along. His face was, as ever, hidden behind his mask, and

she had no idea what he might be thinking.

He slipped off his gloves, massaged his fingers as if to loosen them up, then put his gauntlets back on.

“I’ll take rear guard. You back me up.”

“Right on it!” Dwarf Shaman said, as surely as a hammer forging a sword. Backup and support were what spell casters excelled at. “What’s snow but water? And what goes better with water than dirt?”

He spun like a top, barely glancing at the goblins as he slammed his hands down on the snowy ground. In each hand was a ball of mud, which would be a suitable catalyst.

“Gnomes! Undines! Make for me the finest cushion you will see!”

With a *shlorp*, the ground softened up. The snow melted away before their eyes, turning into water; it mixed with the soft earth and soon became a field of mud.

Snare: so long as it was cast in the opposite direction, it wouldn’t affect the adventurers. It caught only the goblins.

“GAROBA?!”

“ORAG?!”

The first creatures to arrive would tumble, flailing their arms, their feet stuck in the mud. They would then promptly be trampled by their companions. It would serve to reduce the enemy’s numbers slightly and slow them down a bit. Or should have.

“ORAGARARAU!!”

At that moment, however, the goblin paladin’s prayer rang out across the battlefield. And behold! The goblins, surrounded by a pale light, walked easily through the mud!

“Wh-wha...?!”

Dwarf Shaman was agog at this. Such a thing would never have happened were their opponents ordinary goblins. But these had a goblin paladin to lead them.

It must have been the Counterspell miracle.

“Gaaah!” Dwarf Shaman exclaimed. “Stupid, sneaky goblins!”

"Looks like we'll have to let my arrows do the talking," High Elf Archer said, launching a bolt at the oncoming goblin army. It flew in between the ranks of the monsters, as if threading a needle, straight toward the paladin...

"GAROARO?!"

"...Oh!" High Elf Archer clicked her tongue. Another goblin had jumped in front of the leader, sacrificing himself. "Ahh, darnit! I had him just where I wanted him, too!"

"The enemy numbers have been reduced. I'll switch with you," Goblin Slayer said, moving quickly to the back of the formation. With a casual swipe, he beheaded a goblin who had gotten too close.

He threw his sword at the next oncoming creature, kicking a spear at his feet up into his hand.

"Eight, nine." He gave a thrust to check the weapon, then glanced over his shoulder and resumed retreating. "We can't go straight into the village with them behind us. I recall there was a valley on the way."

"If memory serves, it's not too far," Lizard Priest said.

"We'll go there, then."

He looked back, flinging his spear. It pierced the chest armor of a goblin up front, pinning him to the snowy ground.

"What'd I tell you, Beard-cutter?"

"Sorry."

Dwarf Shaman pulled another sword out of the bundle he was carrying and tossed it to Goblin Slayer. Fighting this way, leaving the enemy corpses—and their equipment—behind, was tricky because it meant a less steady flow of armaments.

Goblin Slayer cut down one or two goblins, then, when the blade became dulled with fat and blood, he flipped it into a reverse grip.

"Hrk...!" There was a muffled crunch as he used the hilt and handle to crack a goblin's skull. He held the blade in gloved hands, wielding it like a hammer, killing the goblin in a single blow.

“Thirteen!”

He wiped the brains off his improvised weapon and moved to strike the next monster. The whole hilt ended up buried in the chest plate of the goblin’s ostentatious leather armor; the creature fell so heavily that Goblin Slayer simply let go of the sword.

“Right, next one!” Dwarf Shaman called. “You want the pickax or the shovel?”

“Does it matter?” High Elf Archer shouted. “Just pick one!” It was her speed and skill that bought them the time to switch weapons; she drew three arrows from her quiver and fired them almost faster than the eye could see. Three goblins were shot through almost simultaneously and died so quickly that they didn’t even cry out as they collapsed to the ground.

That made sixteen.

Goblin Slayer didn’t hesitate. “I need something long.”

“That’d be the shovel, then!”

He caught the spade Dwarf Shaman tossed to him, swinging and striking with it, thrusting, the goblin corpses mounting.

Trying to make the most of the precious time they had been bought, the two young women moved around behind Lizard Priest.

“Just keep moving...!”

“...ngh.”

Priestess said. Noble Fencer only made a grunt of exertion.

“My thanks...!” Lizard Priest said. The girls were pushing him along from behind with their small bodies. As for the Dragontooth Warrior, silently carrying the prisoners, the party had never been so grateful for the familiar.

Goblin Slayer, wielding the shovel like a spear, slew another goblin.

“Nineteen!”

Six adventurers and four rescued prisoners against a

veritable tidal wave of goblins led by a paladin: that was the nature of the fighting retreat down the snowy mountain. Everyone involved was utterly committed, ready to battle to the death. Their breath showed white in the chill air, obscuring their vision. Their feet were beginning to go numb from the snow, yet their bodies were hot.

The sword had brought down twenty goblins, then High Elf Archer's arrows raised the total to twenty-four; Goblin Slayer had picked up an ax for the twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth, then thrown a hatchet for twenty-seven, which was followed by another arrow.

This battle, which had begun with the rising of the sun, had so far yielded thirty goblin corpses, and showed no signs of stopping yet. The halo of morning light shone on snow streaked red with goblin blood, running in great lines as if it had been laid down by an artist's brush.

The struggle was desperate; it would not end until one side, adventurers or goblins, had been killed to the last person. That was the grim truth of goblin slaying.

"Go on ahead," Goblin Slayer said as they came to the mouth of the valley.

The words as such might sound like he was volunteering to sacrifice himself, urging the others to leave him behind and escape while they could. Yet there was no sound of anything so tragic in his voice, which was as cool and dispassionate as ever.

"I will break them here." His declaration elicited a look from the entire party.

"Can—can you indeed?" Lizard Priest asked. He had shifted his two prisoners so he was holding them in front of himself. If the need became great, he could shield them with his back.

"I can. I have no intention of letting them reach the village."

After this brief answer, Goblin Slayer nodded at Dwarf Shaman. The dwarf gave a weary chuckle and shrugged.

"Sorry, Beard-cutter, that was my last weapon."

"Then, milord Goblin Slayer, take mine."

"Thank you."

In place of one of Dwarf Shaman's armaments, he received a fang blade with Sharp Tooth, a sharpening spell, cast upon it. It was the fourth and final miracle Lizard Priest could perform.

High Elf Archer, who had been firing shots as fast as she could load them, let out a sigh. "I'd like to back you up, but... Do you happen to have any arrows, Orcbolg?"

The elves were friends of the forest; if there had been so much as a leafy branch in sight she could have made a bolt for herself. But in the whole silvery-white world, there was no tree to be found.

"Use my sling," Goblin Slayer said, pulling a bag out of his item pouch even as he gave the fang sword a few tentative swipes.

High Elf Archer caught the bag out of the air, hearing the sound of rocks inside as she did so.

"I'm not much for slinging..." There was a frown on her face and a droop in her ears. Still, she knew she had no choice, and she wrapped a stone in the sling.

"You don't like it because you're no good at it," Dwarf Shaman said with a chuckle. "I think it's time I piled on the spells myself, Beard-cutter. What do you say?"

"I doubt there's any purpose in continuing to conserve them. Do as you see fit!"

Dwarf Shaman laid down another Snare. The goblin paladin would simply use Counterspell again, but at least he would be forced to waste one of his miracles. It wouldn't slow down the horde much, but it might buy the adventurers just a few precious moments...

Goblin Slayer was taking a deep breath in when Priestess ran up.

"Goblin Slayer, sir, here's a potion..."

"Thanks. Save your miracle."

"Of course. You trusted me to know when to use it."

He popped the cap off the bottle she handed him and drank it down. As he did so, Priestess busied herself checking the fasteners of his armor, brushing away any snow or dirt that might impede his movements. Then she made a sign and began to pray.

"O Earth Mother, abounding in mercy. May your blessings be upon us..."

This prayer would lead to no miracle; it was just a prayer, a benediction. Yet Goblin Slayer by no means saw it as useless or meaningless. He had never been so arrogant as to refuse anything that someone might do for him.

He tossed the little bottle into the snow as he felt the effects of the potion spreading through his body. He tilted his steel helmet as if unsure what to say; he stared at the goblin horde growing ever closer.

Finally, he said only, "There is a way."

"Yes, sir," Priestess replied. She didn't question him: not out of love, or dependency, or blind obedience. It was simple faith—a belief in Goblin Slayer, the man before her.

He returned the level gaze she gave him. And then he nodded. That was enough.

"I'll leave it to you when to use Protection. And..." His gaze drifted slowly toward Noble Fencer.

"....."

Her generous chest heaved as she sucked in breath, but she was getting her breathing under control. Preparing to use magic, perhaps. Goblin Slayer could guess that much.

No need for him to spell out the details, then.

"When I give the signal, fire."

She nodded, sending a ripple through her honey-colored hair. He added one or two things further. At first Noble Fencer looked at him without comprehension, but then she said, "...I understand."

That was all he needed to hear.

In just a short time, he had done what needed to be done.

Now, there was nothing more to do.

Goblin Slayer looked up at the sky. Were the heavenly hands still rolling the dice up there?

“Let’s begin, then.”

No sooner had he spoken than Goblin Slayer set off at a run through the snow. He was heading for the goblin army. The party nodded to one another, then started to get distance, rescued prisoners in tow.

Rocks from High Elf Archer’s sling went whistling by. One, then two. She was unpracticed at it, but goblins went down under her barrage, and that was enough.

Then Goblin Slayer’s inevitable opponent emerged.

“IGARUARARARA!!”

The goblin paladin.

“Hrmph!”

“IGRUAA!!”

So battle was joined a second time. There was a ringing of metal on metal as their swords met, sparks scattering over the snowy field. The paladin’s aluminum sword beat down Goblin Slayer’s outstretched fang blade.

Fwsh! At their feet, snow rose up like haze. The paladin rushed at Goblin Slayer again, but the warrior swept his attack aside and drew back. Goblin Slayer thrust in retort, but his blade was slapped down again by the aluminum sword.

“So you’ve learned.”

“IGAROU!”

Goblin Slayer kicked snow straight in the howling goblin paladin’s yammering face.

The monster fell back, blinded and gibbering. Goblin Slayer dealt him a blow with his shield.

However, a ringing of metal was the only result.

The goblin paladin had a shield as well. He was hardly making the most use of it, but he had brought it up in time to repel the attack.

“...!”

“GROOB!!”

The two of them shoved their shields against each other, circling. Their breath came out swirled and white.

Goblin Slayer had the advantage in physical strength, but the paladin’s small size was intimidating in its own right. The creature struck out at Goblin Slayer’s shin with his sword, but the adventurer jumped back, out of range.

He kept his eyes fixed on his opponent, whose breath steamed, even as he fought to keep his footing on the slippery snow and adjusted his grip on the hilt of his weapon with one soaking hand.

“GRARAB!!”

“Hrk?!”

There was a muffled *thunk*, and an arrow bounced off his head. It must have come from one of the goblin archers—their army was getting closer.

This was why a helmet was so important.

He shook his head to clear the echo of the impact, then took stock of the situation.

“Where’s your honor?!” High Elf Archer demanded, letting loose another rock. It flew over the archer’s head, striking the goblin behind him. The elf clucked her tongue and fired another missile, this time nailing her target in the shoulder, breaking the bone.

“GRAORURURU...!”

She was hardly in a position, however, to keep the entire goblin horde at bay. The army was watching the goblin paladin’s fight, but that was only because it proved an amusing diversion for them.

It did not mean that the effects of Lunacy had worn off. They were simply waiting, secure in the knowledge that whether the adventurer was victorious or was killed, the outcome would not change. Goblins naturally had no sense of what we might call the “knightly virtues.” Their logic was dictated only by the changing circumstances in front of them. Whether victory or defeat awaited this challenger,

they would fall upon him the moment the combat was decided.

He didn't have time to waste.

"Well, then," Goblin Slayer muttered. He spun his blade around in his hand, dropped into a low stance, and raised his shield. The goblin paladin recognized this posture; he gave a hideous smirk. No doubt he remembered their earlier battle. Goblin Slayer's round shield was facing him, edge out.

"ORAGARARARA!!"

He uttered a terrible war cry and set upon Goblin Slayer. His aluminum sword was at the ready. It would pierce this half-hearted defense easily.

Behold! Yes, see the sword tip bury itself in Goblin Slayer's shield. See how easily it passes through this confection of leather and wood and cloth!

It goes through the shield, tearing the arm, piercing the gauntlet, stabbing flesh. Blood runs down the edge of the blade, dribbling onto the snow and turning it pink.

The aluminum sword struck true, even tearing into Goblin Slayer's shoulder.

The goblin paladin heard the soft groan of someone trying to suppress pain. He smirked, thinking he had won.

"You fell for it."

But in fact, it was the end for him.

The aluminum blade went no farther. He put all his strength into it, but he couldn't make it move.

It was the hilt. The hilt of his sword, heavy enough to double as a war hammer, had become lodged in Goblin Slayer's shield.

"Hr—grr!"

"ORAGA?!"

And in a simple contest of strength, no goblin could hope to overcome a human. Goblin Slayer pulled the sword-pierced shield back, practically taking the goblin's arm with it.

It would be more correct to call it the shield *he had allowed to be pierced*. Otherwise—otherwise, why would he have deliberately revealed his best killing move to the goblin paladin? Why would he have attempted to intercept and attack with his shield even after his own sword was broken?

“Goblins are stupid, but they are not fools.”

For the first time, the goblin paladin saw his opponent’s face. Deep in the darkness within that steel helmet, he saw an eye glowing red.

“*But you are a fool.*”

“AGARARARARA!!”

Goblin Slayer twisted his fang sword, ruthlessly tearing out the paladin’s throat.

There was an eruption of vile goblin blood, polluting the silver world. Goblin Slayer, who had twisted his body to protect the aluminum sword, was drenched in the gore.

“GORA, U...?!”

“GROB! GROB?!?”

He stared at the goblins, who stood frozen with fear there in the valley.

There was no better moment than this. This was precisely the time he had been waiting and hoping for.

“Fire!” he yelled.

“*Tonitrus...oriens...*,” Noble Fencer responded. And then: “*...iacta!*”

Lightning flashed out.

The mountain shook.

The air expanded as electricity shot through it, but the lightning did not fall on the goblins. Everyone followed the spidering bolt with their eyes, up and up.

The lightning struck the summit of the mountain.

There was a rumble and a great shaking.

That could only mean one thing.

“H-hey, that’s a mite dangerous, isn’t it?” Dwarf Shaman said with a frown.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," High Elf Archer added, long ears twitching nervously.

They surely understood: this would well and truly do in the goblins.

"Mm," Lizard Priest nodded knowingly. "It seems it has come."

A violent noise like the drums of war, or like the hoofbeats of an approaching army, was coming toward them. And indeed, death, clad in white, was stampeding down into the valley.

It was an avalanche.

"...!"

The voiceless sound of surprise, and the scream, might have belonged to either High Elf Archer or Noble Fencer. The one who exclaimed "Oh, for crying out loud!" was probably High Elf Archer.

"GARAOROB?!"

"ORARAGURA?!"

Uttering unbearable howls, the goblins were swallowed up by the onrushing snow. There was nothing they could do, no chance to run; they left not even footprints.

In the midst of this chaos, one person jumped forward, acting faster than any other: it was Priestess.

Now. The word came into her mind like a revelation.

There was no hesitation, no reluctance. She clutched her sounding staff and offered up the soul-shredding prayer to the gods.

"O Earth Mother, abounding in mercy, by the power of the land grant safety to we who are weak!"

The white tsunami smashed against an invisible barrier, parting neatly to either side.

From within the miraculous protection granted by the Earth Mother, she looked at him.

He was so far away. One man, alone, among the goblin army, outside of the Earth Mother's miracle.

She wanted to raise her voice, raise her hand, even

though she knew they wouldn't reach him...

"Goblin Slayer, sir!"

Then the white wiped out everything; all vanished from view.

§

"...Is—is he—?!"

She was the first to get up when it was all over: Noble Fencer.

Now that Protection had faded, she had to shake the snow off as she rose.

Everything was white. The snow had obliterated every trace of the fighting and killing that she and the others had wrought. Not so much as a whisker of the goblins remained; they were vanished utterly, as if she had only dreamed them.

"...Where is he? Where's Goblin Slayer...?"

She looked around, looked behind herself. There was no hint of that distinctive armored form. Instead she saw Priestess, holding onto her staff, her breath heaving. She saw her comrades.

Priestess tapped a frozen but thoughtful finger to her lips and looked at the foot of the avalanche. "I guess he must be underneath it all, having been swept up by the snow."

Goblin arms and legs could be seen poking like dead branches out of the snow that had slid into the valley.

"Probably," High Elf Archer said with a nod and a frown. Her ears twitched slightly, once, twice. "Snow is still sliding around in the distance. We'd better not talk too loud."

"In that case, we'd best go walk to meet him, I would say," Lizard Priest said, clearing the white powder off his body with one great shake. He checked that his party, along with the former prisoners and the Dragontooth Warrior who was holding them, were uninjured, then he made a strange palms-together gesture.

Thanks be to my forebears. All the more so as he had heard that it was a great cold that had buried them.

"As the avalanche was not so large, I don't imagine he has gone far," he said.

".....You aren't...worried about him?" Noble Fencer asked.

"Of course we are," Dwarf Shaman replied easily. "He's our friend."

He stroked his beard, pulled a wineskin out of his bag, and took a gulp. Fire and spirits were the way to warm the body. Then he gave a pointed wink.

"But... Well, you understand by now, don't you?"

"This is Goblin Slayer we're talking about," Priestess said, a helpless smile crossing her face.

Even with this testimony, Noble Fencer found she couldn't accept this.

Step by unsteady step, the party worked their way down the mountain, searching as they went. It was quiet now, much the opposite of their fighting retreat shortly before, but the path they were taking was enough to make one faint. With every step she took, Noble Fencer felt an oppressive weight settle on her.

If I hadn't said that I wanted my sword back...maybe he wouldn't have felt the need to do that.

It's my fault.

My fault.

All of it... All of it my fault.

"...ngh..."

Now that everything was over—or rather, now that she was thrown into this circumstance so suddenly—she began to appreciate the full import of what she had done. Her arrogant strategy. The deaths of her friends. The attack on the village. The delay in rescuing the prisoners. And Goblin Slayer.

She should have been able to do better than this. Even just slightly. Things shouldn't have ended in this abject failure.

Go back to the beginning: if she hadn't become an adventurer at all...

Her eyes, staring at the ground, began to blur; it grew hard to see.

And yet, she just made out something moving.

"Oh....!" She didn't mean to make a noise; she clapped her hand over her mouth.

Something was crawling on all fours through the snow. It must have noticed them coming, because it responded abruptly—by shaking off the snow and rising to its feet. It was a man.

"I made a mistake," he said.

He was wearing grimy leather armor. A cheap-looking steel helmet. He had no sword at his hip, and the shield on his arm was shattered.

"I should have been more worried about the impact than about suffocating."

Mistake or no, however, Goblin Slayer appeared perfectly calm.

"...G-Goblin...Slayer...?" Noble Fencer could hardly be blamed for the note of disbelief in her voice.

"Yes. You need something?"

"Is that all you've got to say?" High Elf Archer asked in exasperation.

"Hmm... So you're safe."

"That's *my* line... I've got to admit, I thought it was weird that you just happened to bring along rings for breathing." The elf pressed her brow as if fighting a headache. But her ears bobbed happily.

Suddenly it made sense to Noble Fencer. She looked at her hand. A magical ring, its effect long since expired, peeked out from among her bandages.

The Breathe ring.

Snow was just water, so... So...

"...Did you know all of this would happen, all along?"

"To an extent."

"Goblin Slayer, sir," put in Priestess, "I'm used to the fact that you are who you are, but..." She concluded in a mutter, "*You could have at least let us in on the plan,*" and looked at him reproachfully. "I know you said you wouldn't do anything outrageous, but I was still pretty surprised."

"Don't be silly." Goblin Slayer was on all fours again, digging in the snow as he spoke. "Our enemy was an intelligent goblin. What if someone had let something slip, undermining the plan?"

"Who cares about what-ifs? We were worried about you!"

"Hrk..."

"Will you please tell us what you're going to do, starting next time?"

After a pause, he said, "I understand." That was his whole answer. The rough voice readily suggested a sour expression beneath the helmet.

Quite suddenly, Lizard Priest let out a happy hiss, a smile spreading across his jaws. "Goodness, milord Goblin Slayer, it seems your famous strategies don't work on our dear cleric."

"You said it, Scaly! Even your nagas aren't as scary as a woman scorned!"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! Even so! Even so. You speak true, master spell caster."

The dwarf and the lizard laughed together. They were tired, but their faces were cheerful.

High Elf Archer only shook her head, looking away from them and into the distance. Noble Fencer followed her gaze to find a clear blue sky and a sun so bright it was hard to look at.

"There's about a million things I'd like to chew him out for," High Elf Archer said, a smile just touching her lips. "But this is the way an adventure has to be."

Adventure.

The word cut Noble Fencer to the quick.

Go on an adventure—sneak into a monster nest—work your way through a maze...

The friends with whom she had first attempted such things were gone, and she had only just met the friends she was with now.

I see... So this was an adventure...

“Hey.”

“...!?”

Surprised, Noble Fencer spun to look at the source of the unexpected voice.

“I found it.” Goblin Slayer stood up again, holding something he had pulled out of the snow.

The scabbard gleamed brightly in the sunlight.

With a nonchalant motion, he pulled the aluminum sword out of his shield where it had become lodged. He shook it to clean off the blood—his own blood—then wiped it gently with a rag.

Finally, he put it into the scabbard he had found with a *click*.

“I was able to hold on to the sword, but the sheath was carried away with the goblin paladin, who still had it at his hip.”

“.....Oh....oh.....”

“I think an avalanche was a mistake.”

“...oh...sniff...”

Noble Fencer took the proffered sword in both hands; she could feel the weight of it. Her vision blurred even further; she blinked several times to clear it. Then she rubbed her eyes furiously, but no matter what she did, she couldn’t stop herself. She wiped her nose, but that didn’t help, either.

Droplets of water began to fall on the sword, bouncing away.

Goblin Slayer watched Noble Fencer very seriously as she stood weeping. Dispassionately, almost mechanically, he said, “You do cry a lot.”

Noble Fencer clung to the sword and wept with all her might.

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Is it over? Could it be over?

Illusion and Truth finally take their eyes off the board, look slowly up at each other.

They look at the board again, then at each other, then at the board one more time, before slowly starting to smile.

There's a clap as they high-five each other.

Illusion is beaming, and Truth has his arms proudly crossed, looking quite satisfied.

One must not think that the gods desire to torment adventurers or people or monsters.

The gods sometimes fail, or the dice turn against them, and they may fume and rage.

But even so, an adventurer, confronted with a villain, is quick to assail them.

No doubt the feeling is mutual.

Now—the adventure is over. A resounding success!

They will speak of the deeds of the adventurers. They will praise the hearty fighting of the monsters.

They will admire how terrible the traps were and how clever the adventurers who escaped them.

With Truth and Illusion so joyful, the other gods assemble around them.

Chaos is there, and Order. Fear and Time, even Death and Void!

It's a celebration, a great commotion, a blessing.

No one knows if it is Fate or Chance who decide how the dice fall.

There are good results as well as bad.

Those that inspire joy as well as sadness.

Some results give victory to the adventurers, some to the monsters.

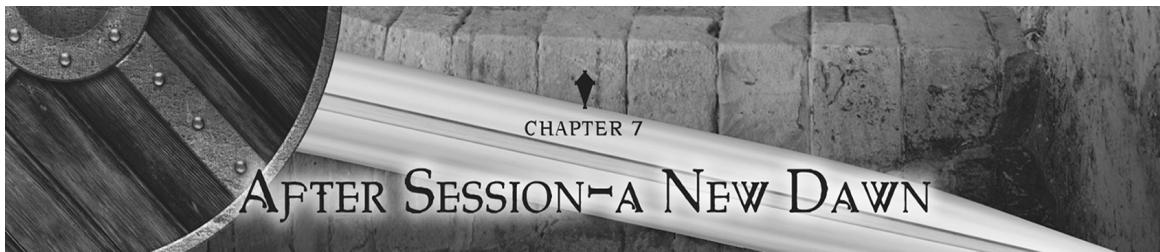
Though one may struggle and strive to discover a treasure chest, sometimes the result means one fails to open it.

Such is life.

Cry or laugh, the number of pips on the dice won't change.

All the more reason to adventure.

And is there anything more wonderful than that?



"All riiiiight! We made it another year without dying!" It was near dawn, and Guild Girl's excited voice rang through the crowded tavern. "To thank the gods of fate and chance, order and chaos—let's have lots of fun today!"

"Haaaaappy New Year!" the adventurers cried with a great shout; they raised their cups and toasted and drank.

Truly an inspiring sight.

All the adventurers in town were gathered at the Guild tavern, practically overflowing from the place. Today, the long winter was finally over, and the new year was beginning, moving all and sundry to raise their voices.

"I'm *telling* you, I did all kinds of things this past year!"

"So, you did."

Spearman was busy enumerating his many brave deeds, muttering into his drink. Beside him, the voluptuous Witch gave a sensuous smile.

"I beat the crap out of stuff with my spear, I slayed a bunch of monsters, even got some experience with magic."

"I am, most aware."

"And *that's* why you shouldn't compare me to some weirdo with a goblin fixation!"

"Sure, sure. You did indeed, work hard."

Over at the next table, Heavy Warrior's party teased their leaders about their budding romance.

"And so it's all, *You oughta settle down yourself!*"

"Y-yeah. Wait. Are you talking about the letter your mother sent you the other day?"

"How can you call yourself a good child, leaving your

parents home and worried about you?' she says!"

"Er, y-you know my parents are gone."

"...Hey, are you listening to me?"

"Yeah, yeah, sure we are. Will somebody do something about this drunk?"

"You're our leader's bride. Come on, do something already."

"Seconded!"

"Hurry up and take responsibility. The rest of us can't handle him."

"I will not forsake my vow as a righteous paladin of Order!"

"Damn it all, ain't anybody know how to listen around here?!"

At length, somebody with a talent for stringed instruments was moved to pluck out a tune. Everyone in the room began to hum along to the endlessly carefree requiem.

O adventurer,

what tragedy that you should die.

Scant space there is on a tombstone.

O adventurer, your name I do not know,

but though you have not left it to us,

O adventurer, if you call me friend—

O my friend,

what tragedy that you should die.

People claim there are many hedonists among adventurers. Those who pay no mind to tomorrow, heeding neither the future nor the past.

But that isn't precisely true.

Many adventurers who have survived for very long are realists. They recognize that one may chase one's dream, may use every means available, yet may die without reaching it.

How foolish, then, to regret anything: be it small

mistakes, a failed adventure, or the death of one's friends.

If one cannot meet these things with a smile and move on, then what hope is there?

"You humans do love a ruckus, don't you?" High Elf Archer eyed the celebration from her spot at a corner table. "End of the year, start of the year, middle of the year... Give you half a chance and you'll be drinking and shouting. You're worse than the dwarves."

"You say that like it's a bad thing, Long-Ears." Dwarf Shaman, holding a roasted chicken with both hands, was in high spirits. How could he be otherwise? The New Year's celebration was larded with every kind of delicious food and wine aplenty. There was nothing better for a dwarf.

"Who said it was a bad thing? It *is* the new year, after all." High Elf Archer winked at Dwarf Shaman, then sipped her drink. The cup in her hand contained grape wine, to which she had added sugar.

She looked around the table, taking in her companions. "So. What are you going to do?"

"...Right." Noble Fencer nodded, almost imperceptibly. Her honey-colored hair was just starting to grow out again; it reached her shoulders now. A little more and it would cover the scar at the nape of her neck. "...I intend to...to meet with my parents, talk things over with them."

Her face was still dark, but she managed a slight smile. She had changed into simple clothing by no means suited to an adventure, but her weapons remained at her hip. Her armaments consisted, of course, of two aluminum blades, one short and one long. As long as she had them, all would be well. Her fingers brushed them gently.

"...I want to make graves for my friends, too. Then I'll decide where I go next."

"Sounds good to me," High Elf Archer said. "Family and friends are both really important."

"The Age of Ice has long since passed, the chalk layer is long buried, and the time of my forebears distant, but their

blood is here." The somber words Lizard Priest murmured sounded like some kind of prayer. Then he opened his jaws wide and inhaled a piece of cheese.

Nectar! Sweet nectar! He lashed his tail and squinted his eyes at the richness of it, chewing eagerly and swallowing it down before finally taking a breath.

"Every blood member of your tribe may not be a good person, but I agree that it is best to value our relations."

"...Yes. Um, about that." This seemed to be the push Noble Fencer needed. She couldn't quite bring herself to look up, blushing slightly and shifting in her seat as she said, "...I'll... I'll write to you. Letters..."

Those were, in the end, the only words she said.

"Yes, please," Priestess responded immediately. "Any time you have anything to tell us, don't hesitate to write." She had been at the Temple for a ceremony marking the passing of the year, after which she had taken a bath, so she was now pleasantly warm. She took Noble Fencer's hand in hers and held it firmly. "I'll write back to you, lots and lots!" she promised.

"...Right. A lot. I'll write plenty to you, too."

"Oh, me too!" High Elf Archer interjected. "I've always wanted to try writing a letter to a friend."

The three girl adventurers chatted away happily. Two more women watched them, smiling: Guild Girl, who had sneaked to their table for a breather, and Cow Girl, whom she'd gestured over.

"Hee-hee-hee. Quite friendly, aren't they?" Guild Girl said.

"They sure are! Maybe I'll write a letter, too." Cow Girl was leaning on the table (apparently the celebratory atmosphere had convinced her not to stand on ceremony), her huge chest squished against the surface. "I don't get a lot of chances to meet other girls my age, working on the farm."

"You don't meet a lot more of them working at the Guild, believe me." Guild Girl put some pepper on the stir-fried liver she'd ordered as a side dish and brought it to her

mouth, nodding. "Plus, we're officially discouraged from getting too close to the adventurers.

"*Not that that stops us,*" she added with a mischievous wink.

The five women were only tenuously connected, but they bonded immediately. Time and friendship are often thus.

But this meant that the men, of whom there were only two, were grievously outnumbered.

"I could wish milord Goblin Slayer had joined us tonight," Lizard Priest said quietly.

"You said it," Dwarf Shaman replied. "Beard-cutter needs to have more of these opportunities." He rested his chin on his hands but then snapped his fingers as if he had had a wonderful idea. "I've got it. That'll be one of my resolutions for the coming year."

"Don't hold your breath," High Elf Archer said, giggling at the men's dispirited exchange. "I guess *he*'s an exception anyway. Orcbolg doesn't seem to be much for festivals and celebrations and merrymaking."

Indeed, the adventurer called Goblin Slayer was not to be seen anywhere in the tavern. Priestess stretched her little body to look around, but there was no sign of him. "You're right, even though he seems to be able to hold his liquor perfectly well. Where is Goblin Slayer anyway?"

"Ahh..."

"Hmm..."

Guild Girl and Cow Girl made strained noises and refused to say anything further, but exchanged a meaningful glance.

"As his childhood friend, I'm sure you don't want to budge..."

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha. It would be a lie to say I'm eager." Cow Girl laughed, took a sip of her drink, and nodded once. "But maybe... Maybe just this year, I will."

"Maybe so. He said he wouldn't go to the fair."

Priestess was thoroughly flummoxed by this enigmatic but seemingly significant conversation. As she looked on in

confusion, Cow Girl noisily pulled out a box from beside her.

"Well, maybe we can ask you to deliver a message for us, then. Okay?"

"A message?"

"Yep."

"Uh, I don't mind, but..."

"Hold on. Is that...a boxed meal?" High Elf Archer, her long ears jumping, leaned in and peeked at the box, full of curiosity. "Bread, soup... If you need someone to go outside, I could do it."

"No, Miss Elf, I think you have plenty of chances," Guild Girl said with an ambiguous smile.

"Huh? I don't know what you're talking about, but if you say so..."

"I do," Guild Girl said to the suspicious forest dweller, taking a draught of her drink.

High Elf Archer drained her newly refilled cup, her ears bouncing all the while. The warmth of the wind spread through her body, and as her mood improved, she began feeling more generous.

"Sure, fine," she said. "I don't mind, whatever you say."

"You're it, then," Cow Girl said to Priestess, bowing her head with a mixture of regret and apology.

"R-right. Um, okay, then. Where should I deliver it?"

"Well, if he's doing what he usually does, then—"

§

Isolated from the frontier town, distant even from the farm, was a sprawling field.

A snowy wind blew freely there, with nothing to block it.

There was only a small tent and a single flickering bonfire.

The horizon was dark; it was a new day, but dawn was still far off.

A man sat next to the fire. Suddenly, he looked up, as if he had just noticed something.

"There are no goblins. You may come out."

".....That's no way to talk to a lady."

With a rustle, Priestess walked out of the bushes, answering Goblin Slayer's summons. She had walked half an hour from town, and now she held her frozen hands toward the fire with a sigh of relief. She was wearing a poncho to ward off the cold, but it was still a winter night.

"Just what are you doing out here?"

"I'm on guard." His answer was every bit as succinct as she expected. "Most people are at New Year's celebrations. Goblins may take the opportunity for a retaliatory attack on us."

Come to think of it, he said about the same thing during the harvest festival, didn't he?

The flash of the revived memory left Priestess with an unpleasant premonition, and she found she couldn't help asking:

"Perchance, do you do this every year?"

"Don't ask silly questions."

"S-sure. Right."

"New Year's Eve comes every year."

Oh, for... This impossible, impossible man.

By now, Priestess was well aware of what was going on. The delivery she had been asked to make—food in a little box—made perfect sense, too. Cow Girl and Guild Girl knew just what he was up to; they were worried and wanted someone to check on him.

"I do this every year. There's no problem."

"Yes, there is!"

"Is that so?"

Despite his friends' worries, Goblin Slayer himself seemed utterly unconcerned, sitting by his fire and staring into the darkness. Everyone else was back in town, living it up on New Year's Eve, and he was here, all alone.

"I can't believe it. You've even set up a camp. You're sleeping out here..."

"The harvest festival was attacked. There are no guarantees it won't happen again."

For goodness' sake... That only happened once, and yet he's talking like he's already caught a goblin!

There was simply nothing more Priestess could say.

The wind picked up. Snow began falling again, little flakes darting through the silence.

Unexpectedly, there came a quiet murmur from Goblin Slayer. "...I've spent ten years slaying goblins."

Ten years.

Priestess could only blink at the thought.

In all the time they had known each other, she had never really asked him what had happened to him, back...before.

How many days, how many hours, had he expended on the killing of goblins?

"That is why I can stand against them so capably. But... I cannot promise that the goblins will never evolve."

His speech was slow and measured. He filled in the pauses in his words by poking at the fire. The flames, which had begun to burn low with the cold, sprang back to brilliant life.

"Do you know what the goblin paladin was planning?"

"No..."

"Metalworks. A refinery."

A gust of wind sent snow spiraling around them.

"That's impossible..." Priestess said. When she spoke, she found her voice was shaking more than she expected. It must have been because she was cold. It was winter, and snow was falling. Surely that was it.

"Yes. But I can think of nothing else," Goblin Slayer said, dropping his gaze to the fire. The glow of the flames cast strange shadows on his helmet. "A dwarven fortress. Mining tools. And that girl's aluminum sword. It was forged from a jewel, by lightning. Meaning..."

He didn't have to finish his thought. Priestess understood.

A blade forged with lightning from a red gem...

Goblins rarely if ever conceived of making anything themselves. If they needed lightning, they would simply steal it.

From some stupid spell caster-adventurer, say.

They would capture a wizard, break her spirit, and then force her to cast spells until she died. With that, a goblin army in possession of metal would be born. They would be clad in armor, their heads protected by helmets; they would wield swords and shields.

True, the idea could be dismissed as nothing more than an obsessive fantasy. There were too many uncertain elements. For example, what had really been a part of the goblins' plans? Had it begun with the intention to capture Noble Fencer? Or did it reach back to when they first made the dwarven fortress their base? Still...

"Is it fate or chance that moves the events of this world? Even the gods don't know..."

The words that spilled suddenly from Priestess's mouth were the truth indeed. Just what influenced the dice rolled by the gods in the heavens above? That was a huge mystery.

It's a question we can't answer no matter how much we think about it.

As pointless as trying to count the number of goblins in the world.

"I don't know how much or how long I can prove opponent for them. But I will not relent."

And yet, this person, this man, was spending his life attempting exactly that.

"For... For crying out loud!" Priestess let out a breath and smacked herself on her cold, stiff cheeks. "It's *always* goblins, goblins, goblins. The minute you open your mouth, that's all you talk about."

"Erk..."

"You have to relax once in a while, or you'll run your body and soul into the ground." Priestess put her hands on her hips and looked away from him like a pouting child. It was

partly in jest, partly to tease, and partly deliberate. “I suppose you think goblin slaying is more important than enjoying yourself with your friends.”

“...No.”

“See? Just what I thought. It’s New Year’s Eve! You could at least—”

...No?

“Wha?”

Caught totally off guard by this impossible word, Priestess looked him square in the face. As square as she could anyway, with him wearing his helmet as always. She couldn’t even see his face.

Yet, somewhere behind that visor, she thought she could just glimpse a red eye...

“I confess, parties are not my strong suit,” he said. “But I’m glad everyone enjoys celebrating.”

Sheesh.

Priestess let out a long sigh. The white smoke climbed up into the heavens.

They budged for me, so I could be here...

“Silly man... A warrior, all by yourself? You should at least have someone on backup to help you.”

“.....It’s cold.”

“I know.”

“I see.”

Her short answer had evoked a short response. All the same, he moved aside to make room for her closer to the fire.

Priestess slid her small body in beside him, spreading her poncho so it covered both of them.

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"Well, then, that's that. Let's have something to eat, why don't we? It'll help us keep our strength through till morning."

They were close. They had been closer before sometimes, on adventures, yet somehow she found herself feeling shy.

She looked away from him and busied herself putting a stew pot over the fire, stirring it. A sweet aroma billowed from it, and Priestess deliberately focused her attention on the smell.

"Looks like it's stew. I'll warm it up."

"I see." A pause. Then: "...Oh, that's right. There's something I meant to say."

"What's that?"

Goblin Slayer smiled, just slightly.

"I look forward to another year of adventuring with you."

AFTERWORD

Hullo, Kumo Kagyu here. How did you like *Goblin Slayer*, Vol. 5? This was a story in which goblins showed up on a snowy mountain and had to be slain. I hope you enjoyed it.

Once again, Noboru Kannatuki-sensei provided fantastic illustrations. Thank you, Sensei!

In Volume 4, there were goblins in some of the black-and-white illustrations; in this volume, they show up on the color pages. Those goblins...they're multiplying.

To Kousuke Kurose-sensei, thank you for producing such an awesome manga version of the series every month.

By the time this volume is released, I think the manga should be catching up to the "attack on the farm" sequence. I'm sure it's going to be amazing!

Thank you, too, to all my readers, including all those encouraging me on the web. Thanks so much to the site admins. I'll keep on giving it everything I've got.

To my gaming buddies, thank you for every session. Although I still think there was something weird about that one roll...

To all my creative-type friends, I'll keep leaning on you. It's thanks to you that I'm able to write.

To everyone in the editorial division, and everyone involved in the production of this book, as always thank you so much.

So, Goblin Slayer and his friends have survived a year of adventuring. That's surely thanks to everyone out there.

And me, I've survived a year of writing *Goblin Slayer*, a year in which a lot has happened. Translations have appeared in multiple languages; I was invited to Taiwan; drama CDs, a manga series, and side stories have all been released.

Life really is full of the unexpected. I keep thinking I'm going to open my eyes and find myself lying in bed. It'll turn out I've just been sleeping for a whole year!

The other day, a dancing-girl adventurer danced her heart out at the bar and made enough money to take care of her entire party. I'm of the opinion that adventuring doesn't pay well considering all that you have to put into it, but if you want to make your way in the world, it's kind of unavoidable.

The great men of the past said that adventuring just meant finding new ways to die.

Incidentally, that dancing girl gave the money she made to her husband.

Thank you, honey! Be my breadwinner!

The money was put into the party's common fund. Ah, Mr. Husband, what fine and measured judgment you display!

Our dear Priestess will probably need to start considering what adventure means to her soon. Volume 6 will probably have something to do with that, as well as being a story where goblins show up and need to be goblin-slain.

I'm going to write the best book I can. I hope you'll join me!

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